

PD SHORT STORIES

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NONA VINCENT, by Henry James

BUBBLES, by Don Marquis

"LITTLE SPECK IN GARNERED FRUIT", by O. Henry

THE MORTAL IMMORTAL, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

THE WAG-LADY, by Rex Beach

JUMPING AT CONCLUSIONS, by Will C. Barnes

THE SINS OF PRINCE SARADINE, by G. K. Chesterton

FOUNDLING ON VENUS, by John and Dorothy de Courcy

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS, by Leonard Nasob

NONA VINCENT.

from The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Real Thing and Other Tales*, by Henry James

I.

“I WONDERED whether you wouldn’t read it to me,” said Mrs. Alsager, as they lingered a little near the fire before he took leave. She looked down at the fire sideways, drawing her dress away from it and making her proposal with a shy sincerity that added to her charm. Her charm was always great for Allan Wayworth, and the whole air of her house, which was simply a sort of distillation of herself, so soothing, so beguiling that he always made several false starts before departure. He had spent some such good hours there, had forgotten, in her warm, golden drawing-room, so much of the loneliness and so many of the worries of his life, that it had come to be the immediate answer to his longings, the cure for his aches, the harbour of refuge from his storms. His tribulations were not unprecedented, and some of his advantages, if of a usual kind, were marked in degree, inasmuch as he was very clever for one so young, and very independent for one so poor. He was eight-and-twenty, but he had lived a good deal and was full of ambitions and curiosities and disappointments. The opportunity to talk of some of these in Grosvenor Place corrected perceptibly the immense inconvenience of London. This inconvenience took for him principally the line of insensibility to Allan Wayworth’s literary form. He had a literary form, or he thought he had, and her intelligent recognition of the circumstance was the sweetest consolation Mrs. Alsager could have administered. She was even more literary and more artistic than he, inasmuch as he could often work off his overflow (this was his occupation, his profession), while the generous woman, abounding in happy thoughts, but unedited and unpublished, stood there in the rising tide like the nymph of a fountain in the splash of the marble basin.

The year before, in a big newspaper house, he had found himself next her at dinner, and they had converted the intensely material hour into a feast of reason. There was no motive for her asking him to come to see her but that she liked him, which it was the more agreeable to him to perceive as he perceived at the same time that she was exquisite. She was enviably free to act upon her likings, and it made Wayworth feel less unsuccessful to infer that for the moment he happened to be one of them. He kept the revelation to himself, and indeed there was nothing to turn his head in the kindness of a kind woman. Mrs. Alsager occupied so completely the ground of possession that she would have been condemned to inaction had it not been for the principle of giving. Her husband, who was twenty years her senior, a massive personality in the City and a heavy one at home (wherever he stood, or even sat, he was monumental), owned half a big newspaper and the whole of a great many other things.

He admired his wife, though she bore no children, and liked her to have other tastes than his, as that seemed to give a greater acreage to their life. His own appetites went so far he could scarcely see the boundary, and his theory was to trust her to push the limits of hers, so that between them the pair should astound by their consumption. His ideas were prodigiously vulgar, but some of them had the good fortune to be carried out by a person of perfect delicacy. Her delicacy made her play strange tricks with them, but he never found this out. She attenuated him without his knowing it, for what he mainly thought was that he had aggrandised her. Without her he really would have been bigger still, and society, breathing more freely, was practically under an obligation to her which, to do it justice, it acknowledged by an attitude of mystified respect. She felt a tremulous need to throw her liberty and her leisure into the things of the soul—the most beautiful things she knew. She found them, when she gave time to seeking, in a hundred places, and particularly in a dim and sacred region—the region of active pity—over her entrance into which she dropped curtains so thick that it would have been an impertinence to lift them. But she cultivated other beneficent passions, and if she cherished the dream of something fine the moments at which it most seemed to her to come true were when she saw beauty plucked flower-like in the garden of art. She loved the perfect work—she had the artistic chord. This chord could vibrate only to the touch of another, so that appreciation, in her spirit, had the added intensity of regret. She could understand the joy of creation, and she thought it scarcely enough to be told that she herself created happiness. She would have liked, at any rate, to choose her way; but it was just here that her liberty failed her. She had not the voice—she had only the vision. The only envy she was capable of was directed to those who, as she said, could do something.

As everything in her, however, turned to gentleness, she was admirably hospitable to such people as a class. She believed Allan Wayworth could do something, and she liked to hear him talk of the ways in which he meant to show it. He talked of them almost to no one else—she spoiled him for other listeners. With her fair bloom and her quiet grace she was indeed an ideal public, and if she had ever confided to him that she would have liked to scribble (she had in fact not mentioned it to a creature), he would have been in a perfect position for asking her why a woman whose face had so much expression should not have felt that she achieved. How in the world could she express better? There was less than that in Shakespeare and Beethoven. She had never been more generous than when, in compliance with her invitation, which I have recorded, he brought his play to read to her. He had spoken of it to her before, and one dark November afternoon, when her red fireside was more than ever an escape from the place and the season, he had broken out as he came in—“I’ve done it, I’ve done it!” She made him tell her all about it—she took an interest really minute and asked questions delightfully apt. She had spoken from the first as if he were on the point of being acted, making him jump, with her participation, all sorts of dreary intervals.

She liked the theatre as she liked all the arts of expression, and he had known her to go all the way to Paris for a particular performance. Once he had gone with her—the time she took that stupid Mrs. Mostyn. She had been struck, when he sketched it, with the subject of his drama, and had spoken words that helped him to believe in it. As soon as he had rung down his curtain on the last act he rushed off to see her, but after that he kept the thing for repeated last touches. Finally, on Christmas day, by arrangement, she sat there and listened to it. It was in three acts and in prose, but rather of the romantic order, though dealing with contemporary English life, and he fondly believed that it showed the hand if not of the master, at least of the prize pupil.

Allan Wayworth had returned to England, at two-and-twenty, after a miscellaneous continental education; his father, the correspondent, for years, in several foreign countries successively, of a conspicuous London journal, had died just after this, leaving his mother and her two other children, portionless girls, to subsist on a very small income in a very dull German town. The young man's beginnings in London were difficult, and he had aggravated them by his dislike of journalism. His father's connection with it would have helped him, but he was (insanely, most of his friends judged—the great exception was always Mrs. Alsager) intraitable on the question of form. Form—in his sense—was not demanded by English newspapers, and he couldn't give it to them in their sense. The demand for it was not great anywhere, and Wayworth spent costly weeks in polishing little compositions for magazines that didn't pay for style. The only person who paid for it was really Mrs. Alsager: she had an infallible instinct for the perfect. She paid in her own way, and if Allan Wayworth had been a wage-earning person it would have made him feel that if he didn't receive his legal dues his palm was at least occasionally conscious of a gratuity. He had his limitations, his perversities, but the finest parts of him were the most alive, and he was restless and sincere. It is however the impression he produced on Mrs. Alsager that most concerns us: she thought him not only remarkably good-looking but altogether original. There were some usual bad things he would never do—too many prohibitive puddles for him in the short cut to success.

For himself, he had never been so happy as since he had seen his way, as he fondly believed, to some sort of mastery of the scenic idea, which struck him as a very different matter now that he looked at it from within. He had had his early days of contempt for it, when it seemed to him a jewel, dim at the best, hidden in a dunghill, a taper burning low in an air thick with vulgarity. It was hedged about with sordid approaches, it was not worth sacrifice and suffering. The man of letters, in dealing with it, would have to put off all literature, which was like asking the bearer of a noble name to forego his immemorial heritage. Aspects change, however, with the point of view: Wayworth had waked up one morning in a different bed altogether. It is needless here to trace this accident to its source; it would have been much more

interesting to a spectator of the young man's life to follow some of the consequences. He had been made (as he felt) the subject of a special revelation, and he wore his hat like a man in love. An angel had taken him by the hand and guided him to the shabby door which opens, it appeared, into an interior both splendid and austere. The scenic idea was magnificent when once you had embraced it—the dramatic form had a purity which made some others look ingloriously rough. It had the high dignity of the exact sciences, it was mathematical and architectural. It was full of the refreshment of calculation and construction, the incorruptibility of line and law. It was bare, but it was erect, it was poor, but it was noble; it reminded him of some sovereign famed for justice who should have lived in a palace despoiled. There was a fearful amount of concession in it, but what you kept had a rare intensity. You were perpetually throwing over the cargo to save the ship, but what a motion you gave her when you made her ride the waves—a motion as rhythmic as the dance of a goddess! Wayworth took long London walks and thought of these things—London poured into his ears the mighty hum of its suggestion. His imagination glowed and melted down material, his intentions multiplied and made the air a golden haze. He saw not only the thing he should do, but the next and the next and the next; the future opened before him and he seemed to walk on marble slabs. The more he tried the dramatic form the more he loved it, the more he looked at it the more he perceived in it. What he perceived in it indeed he now perceived everywhere; if he stopped, in the London dusk, before some flaring shop-window, the place immediately constituted itself behind footlights, became a framed stage for his figures. He hammered at these figures in his lonely lodging, he shaped them and he shaped their tabernacle; he was like a goldsmith chiselling a casket, bent over with the passion for perfection. When he was neither roaming the streets with his vision nor worrying his problem at his table, he was exchanging ideas on the general question with Mrs. Alsager, to whom he promised details that would amuse her in later and still happier hours. Her eyes were full of tears when he read her the last words of the finished work, and she murmured, divinely—

“And now—to get it done, to get it done!”

“Yes, indeed—to get it done!” Wayworth stared at the fire, slowly rolling up his type-copy. “But that’s a totally different part of the business, and altogether secondary.”

“But of course you want to be acted?”

“Of course I do—but it’s a sudden descent. I want to intensely, but I’m sorry I want to.”

“It’s there indeed that the difficulties begin,” said Mrs. Alsager, a little off her guard.

“How can you say that? It’s there that they end!”

“Ah, wait to see where they end!”

“I mean they’ll now be of a totally different order,” Wayworth explained. “It seems to me there can be nothing in the world more difficult than to write a play that will stand an all-round test, and that in comparison with them the complications that spring up at this point are of an altogether smaller kind.”

“Yes, they’re not inspiring,” said Mrs. Alsager; “they’re discouraging, because they’re vulgar. The other problem, the working out of the thing itself, is pure art.”

“How well you understand everything!” The young man had got up, nervously, and was leaning against the chimney-piece with his back to the fire and his arms folded. The roll of his copy, in his fist, was squeezed into the hollow of one of them. He looked down at Mrs. Alsager, smiling gratefully, and she answered him with a smile from eyes still charmed and suffused. “Yes, the vulgarity will begin now,” he presently added.

“You’ll suffer dreadfully.”

“I shall suffer in a good cause.”

“Yes, giving that to the world! You must leave it with me, I must read it over and over,” Mrs. Alsager pleaded, rising to come nearer and draw the copy, in its cover of greenish-grey paper, which had a generic identity now to him, out of his grasp. “Who in the world will do it—who in the world can?” she went on, close to him, turning over the leaves. Before he could answer she had stopped at one of the pages; she turned the book round to him, pointing out a speech. “That’s the most beautiful place—those lines are a perfection.” He glanced at the spot she indicated, and she begged him to read them again—he had read them admirably before. He knew them by heart, and, closing the book while she held the other end of it, he murmured them over to her—they had indeed a cadence that pleased him—watching, with a facetious complacency which he hoped was pardonable, the applause in her face. “Ah, who can utter such lines as that?” Mrs. Alsager broke out; “whom can you find to do her?”

“We’ll find people to do them all!”

“But not people who are worthy.”

“They’ll be worthy enough if they’re willing enough. I’ll work with them—I’ll grind it into them.” He spoke as if he had produced twenty plays.

“Oh, it will be interesting!” she echoed.

“But I shall have to find my theatre first. I shall have to get a manager to believe in me.”

“Yes—they’re so stupid!”

“But fancy the patience I shall want, and how I shall have to watch and wait,” said Allan Wayworth. “Do you see me hawking it about London?”

“Indeed I don’t—it would be sickening.”

“It’s what I shall have to do. I shall be old before it’s produced.”

“I shall be old very soon if it isn’t!” Mrs. Alsager cried. “I know one or two of them,” she mused.

“Do you mean you would speak to them?”

“The thing is to get them to read it. I could do that.”

“That’s the utmost I ask. But it’s even for that I shall have to wait.”

She looked at him with kind sisterly eyes. “You sha’n’t wait.”

“Ah, you dear lady!” Wayworth murmured.

“That is you may, but I won’t! Will you leave me your copy?” she went on, turning the pages again.

“Certainly; I have another.” Standing near him she read to herself a passage here and there; then, in her sweet voice, she read some of them out. “Oh, if you were only an actress!” the young man exclaimed.

“That’s the last thing I am. There’s no comedy in me!”

She had never appeared to Wayworth so much his good genius. “Is there any tragedy?” he asked, with the levity of complete confidence.

She turned away from him, at this, with a strange and charming laugh and a “Perhaps that will be for you to determine!” But before he could disclaim such a responsibility she had faced him again and was talking about Nona Vincent as if she had been the most interesting of their friends and her situation at that moment an irresistible appeal to their sympathy. Nona Vincent was the heroine of the play, and Mrs. Alsager had taken a tremendous fancy to her. “I can’t tell you how I like that woman!” she exclaimed in a pensive rapture of credulity which could only be balm to the artistic spirit.

"I'm awfully glad she lives a bit. What I feel about her is that she's a good deal like _you_," Wayworth observed.

Mrs. Alsager stared an instant and turned faintly red. This was evidently a view that failed to strike her; she didn't, however, treat it as a joke. "I'm not impressed with the resemblance. I don't see myself doing what she does."

"It isn't so much what she _does_," the young man argued, drawing out his moustache.

"But what she does is the whole point. She simply tells her love—I should never do that."

"If you repudiate such a proceeding with such energy, why do you like her for it?"

"It isn't what I like her for."

"What else, then? That's intensely characteristic."

Mrs. Alsager reflected, looking down at the fire; she had the air of having half-a-dozen reasons to choose from. But the one she produced was unexpectedly simple; it might even have been prompted by despair at not finding others. "I like her because _you_ made her!" she exclaimed with a laugh, moving again away from her companion.

Wayworth laughed still louder. "You made her a little yourself. I've thought of her as looking like you."

"She ought to look much better," said Mrs. Alsager. "No, certainly, I shouldn't do what _she_ does."

"Not even in the same circumstances?"

"I should never find myself in such circumstances. They're exactly your play, and have nothing in common with such a life as mine. However," Mrs. Alsager went on, "her behaviour was natural for _her_, and not only natural, but, it seems to me, thoroughly beautiful and noble. I can't sufficiently admire the talent and tact with which you make one accept it, and I tell you frankly that it's evident to me there must be a brilliant future before a young man who, at the start, has been capable of such a stroke as that. Thank heaven I can admire Nona Vincent as intensely as I feel that I don't resemble her!"

"Don't exaggerate that," said Allan Wayworth.

"My admiration?"

“Your dissimilarity. She has your face, your air, your voice, your motion; she has many elements of your being.”

“Then she’ll damn your play!” Mrs. Alsager replied. They joked a little over this, though it was not in the tone of pleasantry that Wayworth’s hostess soon remarked: “You’ve got your remedy, however: have her done by the right woman.”

“Oh, have her ‘done’—have her ‘done’!” the young man gently wailed.

“I see what you mean, my poor friend. What a pity, when it’s such a magnificent part—such a chance for a clever serious girl! Nona Vincent is practically your play—it will be open to her to carry it far or to drop it at the first corner.”

“It’s a charming prospect,” said Allan Wayworth, with sudden scepticism. They looked at each other with eyes that, for a lurid moment, saw the worst of the worst; but before they parted they had exchanged vows and confidences that were dedicated wholly to the ideal. It is not to be supposed, however, that the knowledge that Mrs. Alsager would help him made Wayworth less eager to help himself. He did what he could and felt that she, on her side, was doing no less; but at the end of a year he was obliged to recognise that their united effort had mainly produced the fine flower of discouragement. At the end of a year the lustre had, to his own eyes, quite faded from his unappreciated masterpiece, and he found himself writing for a biographical dictionary little lives of celebrities he had never heard of. To be printed, anywhere and anyhow, was a form of glory for a man so unable to be acted, and to be paid, even at encyclopædic rates, had the consequence of making one resigned and verbose. He couldn’t smuggle style into a dictionary, but he could at least reflect that he had done his best to learn from the drama that it is a gross impertinence almost anywhere. He had knocked at the door of every theatre in London, and, at a ruinous expense, had multiplied type-copies of Nona Vincent to replace the neat transcripts that had descended into the managerial abyss. His play was not even declined—no such flattering intimation was given him that it had been read. What the managers would do for Mrs. Alsager concerned him little today; the thing that was relevant was that they would do nothing for him. That charming woman felt humbled to the earth, so little response had she had from the powers on which she counted. The two never talked about the play now, but he tried to show her a still finer friendship, that she might not think he felt she had failed him. He still walked about London with his dreams, but as months succeeded months and he left the year behind him they were dreams not so much of success as of revenge. Success seemed a colourless name for the reward of his patience; something fiercely florid, something sanguinolent was more to the point. His best consolation however was still in the scenic idea; it was not till now that he discovered how incurably he was in love with it. By the

time a vain second year had chafed itself away he cherished his fruitless faculty the more for the obloquy it seemed to suffer. He lived, in his best hours, in a world of subjects and situations; he wrote another play and made it as different from its predecessor as such a very good thing could be. It might be a very good thing, but when he had committed it to the theatrical limbo indiscriminating fate took no account of the difference. He was at last able to leave England for three or four months; he went to Germany to pay a visit long deferred to his mother and sisters.

Shortly before the time he had fixed for his return he received from Mrs. Alsager a telegram consisting of the words: "Loder wishes see you—putting Nona instant rehearsal." He spent the few hours before his departure in kissing his mother and sisters, who knew enough about Mrs. Alsager to judge it lucky this respectable married lady was not there—a relief, however, accompanied with speculative glances at London and the morrow. Loder, as our young man was aware, meant the new "Renaissance," but though he reached home in the evening it was not to this convenient modern theatre that Wayworth first proceeded. He spent a late hour with Mrs. Alsager, an hour that throbbed with calculation. She told him that Mr. Loder was charming, he had simply taken up the play in its turn; he had hopes of it, moreover, that on the part of a professional pessimist might almost be qualified as ecstatic. It had been cast, with a margin for objections, and Violet Grey was to do the heroine. She had been capable, while he was away, of a good piece of work at that foggy old playhouse the "Legitimate;" the piece was a clumsy réchauffé, but she at least had been fresh. Wayworth remembered Violet Grey—hadn't he, for two years, on a fond policy of "looking out," kept dipping into the London theatres to pick up prospective interpreters? He had not picked up many as yet, and this young lady at all events had never wriggled in his net. She was pretty and she was odd, but he had never prefigured her as Nona Vincent, nor indeed found himself attracted by what he already felt sufficiently launched in the profession to speak of as her artistic personality. Mrs. Alsager was different—she declared that she had been struck not a little by some of her tones. The girl was interesting in the thing at the "Legitimate," and Mr. Loder, who had his eye on her, described her as ambitious and intelligent. She wanted awfully to get on—and some of those ladies were so lazy! Wayworth was sceptical—he had seen Miss Violet Grey, who was terribly itinerant, in a dozen theatres but only in one aspect. Nona Vincent had a dozen aspects, but only one theatre; yet with what a feverish curiosity the young man promised himself to watch the actress on the morrow! Talking the matter over with Mrs. Alsager now seemed the very stuff that rehearsal was made of. The near prospect of being acted laid a finger even on the lip of inquiry; he wanted to go on tiptoe till the first night, to make no condition but that they should speak his lines, and he felt that he wouldn't so much as raise an eyebrow at the scene-painter if he should give him an old oak chamber.

He became conscious, the next day, that his danger would be other than this, and yet he couldn't have expressed to himself what it would be. Danger was there, doubtless—danger was everywhere, in the world of art, and still more in the world of commerce; but what he really seemed to catch, for the hour, was the beating of the wings of victory. Nothing could undermine that, since it was victory simply to be acted. It would be victory even to be acted badly; a reflection that didn't prevent him, however, from banishing, in his politic optimism, the word "bad" from his vocabulary. It had no application, in the compromise of practice; it didn't apply even to his play, which he was conscious he had already outlived and as to which he foresaw that, in the coming weeks, frequent alarm would alternate, in his spirit, with frequent esteem. When he went down to the dusky daylight theatre (it arched over him like the temple of fame) Mr. Loder, who was as charming as Mrs. Alsager had announced, struck him as the genius of hospitality. The manager began to explain why, for so long, he had given no sign; but that was the last thing that interested Wayworth now, and he could never remember afterwards what reasons Mr. Loder had enumerated. He liked, in the whole business of discussion and preparation, even the things he had thought he should probably dislike, and he revelled in those he had thought he should like. He watched Miss Violet Grey that evening with eyes that sought to penetrate her possibilities. She certainly had a few; they were qualities of voice and face, qualities perhaps even of intelligence; he sat there at any rate with a fostering, coaxing attention, repeating over to himself as convincingly as he could that she was not common—a circumstance all the more creditable as the part she was playing seemed to him desperately so. He perceived that this was why it pleased the audience; he divined that it was the part they enjoyed rather than the actress. He had a private panic, wondering how, if they liked that form, they could possibly like his. His form had now become quite an ultimate idea to him. By the time the evening was over some of Miss Violet Grey's features, several of the turns of her head, a certain vibration of her voice, had taken their place in the same category. She was interesting, she was distinguished; at any rate he had accepted her: it came to the same thing. But he left the theatre that night without speaking to her—moved (a little even to his own mystification) by an odd procrastinating impulse. On the morrow he was to read his three acts to the company, and then he should have a good deal to say; what he felt for the moment was a vague indisposition to commit himself. Moreover he found a slight confusion of annoyance in the fact that though he had been trying all the evening to look at Nona Vincent in Violet Grey's person, what subsisted in his vision was simply Violet Grey in Nona's. He didn't wish to see the actress so directly, or even so simply as that; and it had been very fatiguing, the effort to focus Nona both through the performer and through the "Legitimate." Before he went to bed that night he posted three words to Mrs. Alsager—"She's not a bit like it, but I dare say I can make her do."

He was pleased with the way the actress listened, the next day, at the

reading; he was pleased indeed with many things, at the reading, and most of all with the reading itself. The whole affair loomed large to him and he magnified it and mapped it out. He enjoyed his occupation of the big, dim, hollow theatre, full of the echoes of “effect” and of a queer smell of gas and success—it all seemed such a passive canvas for his picture. For the first time in his life he was in command of resources; he was acquainted with the phrase, but had never thought he should know the feeling. He was surprised at what Loder appeared ready to do, though he reminded himself that he must never show it. He foresaw that there would be two distinct concomitants to the artistic effort of producing a play, one consisting of a great deal of anguish and the other of a great deal of amusement. He looked back upon the reading, afterwards, as the best hour in the business, because it was then that the piece had most struck him as represented. What came later was the doing of others; but this, with its imperfections and failures, was all his own. The drama lived, at any rate, for that hour, with an intensity that it was promptly to lose in the poverty and patchiness of rehearsal; he could see its life reflected, in a way that was sweet to him, in the stillness of the little semi-circle of attentive and inscrutable, of water-proofed and muddy-booted, actors. Miss Violet Grey was the auditor he had most to say to, and he tried on the spot, across the shabby stage, to let her have the soul of her part. Her attitude was graceful, but though she appeared to listen with all her faculties her face remained perfectly blank; a fact, however, not discouraging to Wayworth, who liked her better for not being premature. Her companions gave discernible signs of recognising the passages of comedy; yet Wayworth forgave her even then for being inexpressive. She evidently wished before everything else to be simply sure of what it was all about.

He was more surprised even than at the revelation of the scale on which Mr. Loder was ready to proceed by the discovery that some of the actors didn't like their parts, and his heart sank as he asked himself what he could possibly do with them if they were going to be so stupid. This was the first of his disappointments; somehow he had expected every individual to become instantly and gratefully conscious of a rare opportunity, and from the moment such a calculation failed he was at sea, or mindful at any rate that more disappointments would come. It was impossible to make out what the manager liked or disliked; no judgment, no comment escaped him; his acceptance of the play and his views about the way it should be mounted had apparently converted him into a veiled and shrouded figure. Wayworth was able to grasp the idea that they would all move now in a higher and sharper air than that of compliment and confidence. When he talked with Violet Grey after the reading he gathered that she was really rather crude: what better proof of it could there be than her failure to break out instantly with an expression of delight about her great chance? This reserve, however, had evidently nothing to do with high pretensions; she had no wish to make him feel that a person of her eminence was superior to easy raptures. He guessed, after a little, that she was puzzled and even somewhat frightened—to a

certain extent she had not understood. Nothing could appeal to him more than the opportunity to clear up her difficulties, in the course of the examination of which he quickly discovered that, so far as she had understood, she had understood wrong. If she was crude it was only a reason the more for talking to her; he kept saying to her “Ask me—ask me: ask me everything you can think of.”

She asked him, she was perpetually asking him, and at the first rehearsals, which were without form and void to a degree that made them strike him much more as the death of an experiment than as the dawn of a success, they threshed things out immensely in a corner of the stage, with the effect of his coming to feel that at any rate she was in earnest. He felt more and more that his heroine was the keystone of his arch, for which indeed the actress was very ready to take her. But when he reminded this young lady of the way the whole thing practically depended on her she was alarmed and even slightly scandalised: she spoke more than once as if that could scarcely be the right way to construct a play—make it stand or fall by one poor nervous girl. She was almost morbidly conscientious, and in theory he liked her for this, though he lost patience three or four times with the things she couldn’t do and the things she could. At such times the tears came to her eyes; but they were produced by her own stupidity, she hastened to assure him, not by the way he spoke, which was awfully kind under the circumstances. Her sincerity made her beautiful, and he wished to heaven (and made a point of telling her so) that she could sprinkle a little of it over Nona. Once, however, she was so touched and troubled that the sight of it brought the tears for an instant to his own eyes; and it so happened that, turning at this moment, he found himself face to face with Mr. Loder. The manager stared, glanced at the actress, who turned in the other direction, and then smiling at Wayworth, exclaimed, with the humour of a man who heard the gallery laugh every night:

“I say—I say!”

“What’s the matter?” Wayworth asked.

“I’m glad to see Miss Grey is taking such pains with you.”

“Oh, yes—she’ll turn me out!” said the young man, gaily. He was quite aware that it was apparent he was not superficial about Nona, and abundantly determined, into the bargain, that the rehearsal of the piece should not sacrifice a shade of thoroughness to any extrinsic consideration.

Mrs. Alsager, whom, late in the afternoon, he used often to go and ask for a cup of tea, thanking her in advance for the rest she gave him and telling her how he found that rehearsal (as they were doing it—it was a caution!) took it out of one—Mrs. Alsager, more and more his good genius and, as he repeatedly assured her, his ministering angel, confirmed him

in this superior policy and urged him on to every form of artistic devotion. She had, naturally, never been more interested than now in his work; she wanted to hear everything about everything. She treated him as heroically fatigued, plied him with luxurious restoratives, made him stretch himself on cushions and rose-leaves. They gossiped more than ever, by her fire, about the artistic life; he confided to her, for instance, all his hopes and fears, all his experiments and anxieties, on the subject of the representative of Nona. She was immensely interested in this young lady and showed it by taking a box again and again (she had seen her half-a-dozen times already), to study her capacity through the veil of her present part. Like Allan Wayworth she found her encouraging only by fits, for she had fine flashes of badness. She was intelligent, but she cried aloud for training, and the training was so absent that the intelligence had only a fraction of its effect. She was like a knife without an edge—good steel that had never been sharpened; she hacked away at her hard dramatic loaf, she couldn't cut it smooth.

II.

“CERTAINLY my leading lady won't make Nona much like you!” Wayworth one day gloomily remarked to Mrs. Alsager. There were days when the prospect seemed to him awful.

“So much the better. There's no necessity for that.”

“I wish you'd train her a little—you could so easily,” the young man went on; in response to which Mrs. Alsager requested him not to make such cruel fun of her. But she was curious about the girl, wanted to hear of her character, her private situation, how she lived and where, seemed indeed desirous to befriend her. Wayworth might not have known much about the private situation of Miss Violet Grey, but, as it happened, he was able, by the time his play had been three weeks in rehearsal, to supply information on such points. She was a charming, exemplary person, educated, cultivated, with highly modern tastes, an excellent musician. She had lost her parents and was very much alone in the world, her only two relations being a sister, who was married to a civil servant (in a highly responsible post) in India, and a dear little old-fashioned aunt (really a great-aunt) with whom she lived at Notting Hill, who wrote children's books and who, it appeared, had once written a Christmas pantomime. It was quite an artistic home—not on the scale of Mrs. Alsager's (to compare the smallest things with the greatest!) but intensely refined and honourable. Wayworth went so far as to hint that it would be rather nice and human on Mrs. Alsager's part to go there—they would take it so kindly if she should call on them. She had acted so often on his hints that he had formed a pleasant habit of expecting it: it made him feel so wisely responsible about giving them. But this one

appeared to fall to the ground, so that he let the subject drop. Mrs. Alsager, however, went yet once more to the “Legitimate,” as he found by her saying to him abruptly, on the morrow: “Oh, she’ll be very good—she’ll be very good.” When they said “she,” in these days, they always meant Violet Grey, though they pretended, for the most part, that they meant Nona Vincent.

“Oh yes,” Wayworth assented, “she wants so to!”

Mrs. Alsager was silent a moment; then she asked, a little inconsequently, as if she had come back from a reverie: “Does she want to _very_ much?”

“Tremendously—and it appears she has been fascinated by the part from the first.”

“Why then didn’t she say so?”

“Oh, because she’s so funny.”

“She _is_ funny,” said Mrs. Alsager, musingly; and presently she added: “She’s in love with you.”

Wayworth stared, blushed very red, then laughed out. “What is there funny in that?” he demanded; but before his interlocutress could satisfy him on this point he inquired, further, how she knew anything about it. After a little graceful evasion she explained that the night before, at the “Legitimate,” Mrs. Beaumont, the wife of the actor-manager, had paid her a visit in her box; which had happened, in the course of their brief gossip, to lead to her remarking that she had never been “behind.” Mrs. Beaumont offered on the spot to take her round, and the fancy had seized her to accept the invitation. She had been amused for the moment, and in this way it befell that her conductress, at her request, had introduced her to Miss Violet Grey, who was waiting in the wing for one of her scenes. Mrs. Beaumont had been called away for three minutes, and during this scrap of time, face to face with the actress, she had discovered the poor girl’s secret. Wayworth qualified it as a senseless thing, but wished to know what had led to the discovery. She characterised this inquiry as superficial for a painter of the ways of women; and he doubtless didn’t improve it by remarking profanely that a cat might look at a king and that such things were convenient to know. Even on this ground, however, he was threatened by Mrs. Alsager, who contended that it might not be a joking matter to the poor girl. To this Wayworth, who now professed to hate talking about the passions he might have inspired, could only reply that he meant it couldn’t make a difference to Mrs. Alsager.

“How in the world do you know what makes a difference to _me_?” this lady asked, with incongruous coldness, with a haughtiness indeed remarkable in

so gentle a spirit.

He saw Violet Grey that night at the theatre, and it was she who spoke first of her having lately met a friend of his.

“She’s in love with you,” the actress said, after he had made a show of ignorance; “doesn’t that tell you anything?”

He blushed redder still than Mrs. Alsager had made him blush, but replied, quickly enough and very adequately, that hundreds of women were naturally dying for him.

“Oh, I don’t care, for you’re not in love with _her_!” the girl continued.

“Did she tell you that too?” Wayworth asked; but she had at that moment to go on.

Standing where he could see her he thought that on this occasion she threw into her scene, which was the best she had in the play, a brighter art than ever before, a talent that could play with its problem. She was perpetually doing things out of rehearsal (she did two or three to-night, in the other man’s piece), that he as often wished to heaven Nona Vincent might have the benefit of. She appeared to be able to do them for every one but him—that is for every one but Nona. He was conscious, in these days, of an odd new feeling, which mixed (this was a part of its oddity) with a very natural and comparatively old one and which in its most definite form was a dull ache of regret that this young lady’s unlucky star should have placed her on the stage. He wished in his worst uneasiness that, without going further, she would give it up; and yet it soothed that uneasiness to remind himself that he saw grounds to hope she would go far enough to make a marked success of Nona. There were strange and painful moments when, as the interpretress of Nona, he almost hated her; after which, however, he always assured himself that he exaggerated, inasmuch as what made this aversion seem great, when he was nervous, was simply its contrast with the growing sense that there _were_ grounds—totally different—on which she pleased him. She pleased him as a charming creature—by her sincerities and her perversities, by the varieties and surprises of her character and by certain happy facts of her person. In private her eyes were sad to him and her voice was rare. He detested the idea that she should have a disappointment or an humiliation, and he wanted to rescue her altogether, to save and transplant her. One way to save her was to see to it, to the best of his ability, that the production of his play should be a triumph; and the other way—it was really too queer to express—was almost to wish that it shouldn’t be. Then, for the future, there would be safety and peace, and not the peace of death—the peace of a different life. It is to be added that our young man clung to the former of these ways in proportion as the latter perversely tempted him. He was nervous at the best, increasingly

and intolerably nervous; but the immediate remedy was to rehearse harder and harder, and above all to work it out with Violet Grey. Some of her comrades reproached him with working it out only with her, as if she were the whole affair; to which he replied that they could afford to be neglected, they were all so tremendously good. She was the only person concerned whom he didn't flatter.

The author and the actress stuck so to the business in hand that she had very little time to speak to him again of Mrs. Alsager, of whom indeed her imagination appeared adequately to have disposed. Wayworth once remarked to her that Nona Vincent was supposed to be a good deal like his charming friend; but she gave a blank "Supposed by whom?" in consequence of which he never returned to the subject. He confided his nervousness as freely as usual to Mrs. Alsager, who easily understood that he had a peculiar complication of anxieties. His suspense varied in degree from hour to hour, but any relief there might have been in this was made up for by its being of several different kinds. One afternoon, as the first performance drew near, Mrs. Alsager said to him, in giving him his cup of tea and on his having mentioned that he had not closed his eyes the night before:

"You must indeed be in a dreadful state. Anxiety for another is still worse than anxiety for one's self."

"For another?" Wayworth repeated, looking at her over the rim of his cup.

"My poor friend, you're nervous about Nona Vincent, but you're infinitely more nervous about Violet Grey."

"She is Nona Vincent!"

"No, she isn't—not a bit!" said Mrs. Alsager, abruptly.

"Do you really think so?" Wayworth cried, spilling his tea in his alarm.

"What I think doesn't signify—I mean what I think about that. What I meant to say was that great as is your suspense about your play, your suspense about your actress is greater still."

"I can only repeat that my actress is my play."

Mrs. Alsager looked thoughtfully into the teapot.

"Your actress is your—"

"My what?" the young man asked, with a little tremor in his voice, as his hostess paused.

"Your very dear friend. You're in love with her—at present." And with a

sharp click Mrs. Alsager dropped the lid on the fragrant receptacle.

“Not yet—not yet!” laughed her visitor.

“You will be if she pulls you through.”

“You declare that she _won’t_ pull me through.”

Mrs. Alsager was silent a moment, after which she softly murmured: “I’ll pray for her.”

“You’re the most generous of women!” Wayworth cried; then coloured as if the words had not been happy. They would have done indeed little honour to a man of tact.

The next morning he received five hurried lines from Mrs. Alsager. She had suddenly been called to Torquay, to see a relation who was seriously ill; she should be detained there several days, but she had an earnest hope of being able to return in time for his first night. In any event he had her unrestricted good wishes. He missed her extremely, for these last days were a great strain and there was little comfort to be derived from Violet Grey. She was even more nervous than himself, and so pale and altered that he was afraid she would be too ill to act. It was settled between them that they made each other worse and that he had now much better leave her alone. They had pulled Nona so to pieces that nothing seemed left of her—she must at least have time to grow together again. He left Violet Grey alone, to the best of his ability, but she carried out imperfectly her own side of the bargain. She came to him with new questions—she waited for him with old doubts, and half an hour before the last dress-rehearsal, on the eve of production, she proposed to him a totally fresh rendering of his heroine. This incident gave him such a sense of insecurity that he turned his back on her without a word, bolted out of the theatre, dashed along the Strand and walked as far as the Bank. Then he jumped into a hansom and came westward, and when he reached the theatre again the business was nearly over. It appeared, almost to his disappointment, not bad enough to give him the consolation of the old playhouse adage that the worst dress-rehearsals make the best first nights.

The morrow, which was a Wednesday, was the dreadful day; the theatre had been closed on the Monday and the Tuesday. Every one, on the Wednesday, did his best to let every one else alone, and every one signally failed in the attempt. The day, till seven o’clock, was understood to be consecrated to rest, but every one except Violet Grey turned up at the theatre. Wayworth looked at Mr. Loder, and Mr. Loder looked in another direction, which was as near as they came to conversation. Wayworth was in a fidget, unable to eat or sleep or sit still, at times almost in terror. He kept quiet by keeping, as usual, in motion; he tried to walk away from his nervousness. He walked in the afternoon toward Notting

Hill, but he succeeded in not breaking the vow he had taken not to meddle with his actress. She was like an acrobat poised on a slippery ball—if he should touch her she would topple over. He passed her door three times and he thought of her three hundred. This was the hour at which he most regretted that Mrs. Alsager had not come back—for he had called at her house only to learn that she was still at Torquay. This was probably queer, and it was probably queerer still that she hadn't written to him; but even of these things he wasn't sure, for in losing, as he had now completely lost, his judgment of his play, he seemed to himself to have lost his judgment of everything. When he went home, however, he found a telegram from the lady of Grosvenor Place—"Shall be able to come—reach town by seven." At half-past eight o'clock, through a little aperture in the curtain of the "Renaissance," he saw her in her box with a cluster of friends—completely beautiful and beneficent. The house was magnificent—too good for his play, he felt; too good for any play. Everything now seemed too good—the scenery, the furniture, the dresses, the very programmes. He seized upon the idea that this was probably what was the matter with the representative of Nona—she was only too good. He had completely arranged with this young lady the plan of their relations during the evening; and though they had altered everything else that they had arranged they had promised each other not to alter this. It was wonderful the number of things they had promised each other. He would start her, he would see her off—then he would quit the theatre and stay away till just before the end. She besought him to stay away—it would make her infinitely easier. He saw that she was exquisitely dressed—she had made one or two changes for the better since the night before, and that seemed something definite to turn over and over in his mind as he rumbled foggily home in the four-wheeler in which, a few steps from the stage-door, he had taken refuge as soon as he knew that the curtain was up. He lived a couple of miles off, and he had chosen a four-wheeler to drag out the time.

When he got home his fire was out, his room was cold, and he lay down on his sofa in his overcoat. He had sent his landlady to the dress-circle, on purpose; she would overflow with words and mistakes. The house seemed a black void, just as the streets had done—every one was, formidably, at his play. He was quieter at last than he had been for a fortnight, and he felt too weak even to wonder how the thing was going. He believed afterwards that he had slept an hour; but even if he had he felt it to be still too early to return to the theatre. He sat down by his lamp and tried to read—to read a little compendious life of a great English statesman, out of a "series." It struck him as brilliantly clever, and he asked himself whether that perhaps were not rather the sort of thing he ought to have taken up: not the statesmanship, but the art of brief biography. Suddenly he became aware that he must hurry if he was to reach the theatre at all—it was a quarter to eleven o'clock. He scrambled out and, this time, found a hansom—he had lately spent enough money in cabs to add to his hope that the profits of his new profession would be great. His anxiety, his suspense flamed up again, and as he

rattled eastward—he went fast now—he was almost sick with alternations. As he passed into the theatre the first man—some underling—who met him, cried to him, breathlessly:

“You’re wanted, sir—you’re wanted!” He thought his tone very ominous—he devoured the man’s eyes with his own, for a betrayal: did he mean that he was wanted for execution? Some one else pressed him, almost pushed him, forward; he was already on the stage. Then he became conscious of a sound more or less continuous, but seemingly faint and far, which he took at first for the voice of the actors heard through their canvas walls, the beautiful built-in room of the last act. But the actors were in the wing, they surrounded him; the curtain was down and they were coming off from before it. They had been called, and he was called—they all greeted him with “Go on—go on!” He was terrified—he couldn’t go on—he didn’t believe in the applause, which seemed to him only audible enough to sound half-hearted.

“Has it gone?—has it gone?” he gasped to the people round him; and he heard them say “Rather—rather!” perfunctorily, mendaciously too, as it struck him, and even with mocking laughter, the laughter of defeat and despair. Suddenly, though all this must have taken but a moment, Loder burst upon him from somewhere with a “For God’s sake don’t keep them, or they’ll stop!” “But I can’t go on for that!” Wayworth cried, in anguish; the sound seemed to him already to have ceased. Loder had hold of him and was shoving him; he resisted and looked round frantically for Violet Grey, who perhaps would tell him the truth. There was by this time a crowd in the wing, all with strange grimacing painted faces, but Violet was not among them and her very absence frightened him. He uttered her name with an accent that he afterwards regretted—it gave them, as he thought, both away; and while Loder hustled him before the curtain he heard some one say “She took her call and disappeared.” She had had a call, then—this was what was most present to the young man as he stood for an instant in the glare of the footlights, looking blindly at the great vaguely-peopled horseshoe and greeted with plaudits which now seemed to him at once louder than he deserved and feebler than he desired. They sank to rest quickly, but he felt it to be long before he could back away, before he could, in his turn, seize the manager by the arm and cry huskily—“Has it really gone—really?”

Mr. Loder looked at him hard and replied after an instant: “The play’s all right!”

Wayworth hung upon his lips. “Then what’s all wrong?”

“We must do something to Miss Grey.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

“She isn’t in it!”

“Do you mean she has failed?”

“Yes, damn it—she has failed.”

Wayworth stared. “Then how can the play be all right?”

“Oh, we’ll save it—we’ll save it.”

“Where’s Miss Grey—where is she?” the young man asked.

Loder caught his arm as he was turning away again to look for his heroine. “Never mind her now—she knows it!”

Wayworth was approached at the same moment by a gentleman he knew as one of Mrs. Alsager’s friends—he had perceived him in that lady’s box. Mrs. Alsager was waiting there for the successful author; she desired very earnestly that he would come round and speak to her. Wayworth assured himself first that Violet had left the theatre—one of the actresses could tell him that she had seen her throw on a cloak, without changing her dress, and had learnt afterwards that she had, the next moment, flung herself, after flinging her aunt, into a cab. He had wished to invite half a dozen persons, of whom Miss Grey and her elderly relative were two, to come home to supper with him; but she had refused to make any engagement beforehand (it would be so dreadful to have to keep it if she shouldn’t have made a hit), and this attitude had blighted the pleasant plan, which fell to the ground. He had called her morbid, but she was immovable. Mrs. Alsager’s messenger let him know that he was expected to supper in Grosvenor Place, and half an hour afterwards he was seated there among complimentary people and flowers and popping corks, eating the first orderly meal he had partaken of for a week. Mrs. Alsager had carried him off in her brougham—the other people who were coming got into things of their own. He stopped her short as soon as she began to tell him how tremendously every one had been struck by the piece; he nailed her down to the question of Violet Grey. Had she spoilt the play, had she jeopardised or compromised it—had she been utterly bad, had she been good in any degree?

“Certainly the performance would have seemed better if she had been better,” Mrs. Alsager confessed.

“And the play would have seemed better if the performance had been better,” Wayworth said, gloomily, from the corner of the brougham.

“She does what she can, and she has talent, and she looked lovely. But she doesn’t see Nona Vincent. She doesn’t see the type—she doesn’t see the individual—she doesn’t see the woman you meant. She’s out of it—she gives you a different person.”

“Oh, the woman I meant!” the young man exclaimed, looking at the London lamps as he rolled by them. “I wish to God she had known _you_!” he added, as the carriage stopped. After they had passed into the house he said to his companion:

“You see she _won’t_ pull me through.”

“Forgive her—be kind to her!” Mrs. Alsager pleaded.

“I shall only thank her. The play may go to the dogs.”

“If it does—if it does,” Mrs. Alsager began, with her pure eyes on him.

“Well, what if it does?”

She couldn’t tell him, for the rest of her guests came in together; she only had time to say: “It _sha’n’t_ go to the dogs!”

He came away before the others, restless with the desire to go to Notting Hill even that night, late as it was, haunted with the sense that Violet Grey had measured her fall. When he got into the street, however, he allowed second thoughts to counsel another course; the effect of knocking her up at two o’clock in the morning would hardly be to soothe her. He looked at six newspapers the next day and found in them never a good word for her. They were well enough about the piece, but they were unanimous as to the disappointment caused by the young actress whose former efforts had excited such hopes and on whom, on this occasion, such pressing responsibilities rested. They asked in chorus what was the matter with her, and they declared in chorus that the play, which was not without promise, was handicapped (they all used the same word) by the odd want of correspondence between the heroine and her interpreter. Wayworth drove early to Notting Hill, but he didn’t take the newspapers with him; Violet Grey could be trusted to have sent out for them by the peep of dawn and to have fed her anguish full. She declined to see him—she only sent down word by her aunt that she was extremely unwell and should be unable to act that night unless she were suffered to spend the day unmolested and in bed. Wayworth sat for an hour with the old lady, who understood everything and to whom he could speak frankly. She gave him a touching picture of her niece’s condition, which was all the more vivid for the simple words in which it was expressed: “She feels she isn’t right, you know—she feels she isn’t right!”

“Tell her it doesn’t matter—it doesn’t matter a straw!” said Wayworth.

“And she’s so proud—you know how proud she is!” the old lady went on.

“Tell her I’m more than satisfied, that I accept her gratefully as she is.”

“She says she injures your play, that she ruins it,” said his interlocutress.

“She’ll improve, immensely—she’ll grow into the part,” the young man continued.

“She’d improve if she knew how—but she says she doesn’t. She has given all she has got, and she doesn’t know what’s wanted.”

“What’s wanted is simply that she should go straight on and trust me.”

“How can she trust you when she feels she’s losing you?”

“Losing me?” Wayworth cried.

“You’ll never forgive her if your play is taken off!”

“It will run six months,” said the author of the piece.

The old lady laid her hand on his arm. “What will you do for her if it does?”

He looked at Violet Grey’s aunt a moment. “Do you say your niece is very proud?”

“Too proud for her dreadful profession.”

“Then she wouldn’t wish you to ask me that,” Wayworth answered, getting up.

When he reached home he was very tired, and for a person to whom it was open to consider that he had scored a success he spent a remarkably dismal day. All his restlessness had gone, and fatigue and depression possessed him. He sank into his old chair by the fire and sat there for hours with his eyes closed. His landlady came in to bring his luncheon and mend the fire, but he feigned to be asleep, so as not to be spoken to. It is to be supposed that sleep at last overtook him, for about the hour that dusk began to gather he had an extraordinary impression, a visit that, it would seem, could have belonged to no waking consciousness. Nona Vincent, in face and form, the living heroine of his play, rose before him in his little silent room, sat down with him at his dingy fireside. She was not Violet Grey, she was not Mrs. Alsager, she was not any woman he had seen upon earth, nor was it any masquerade of friendship or of penitence. Yet she was more familiar to him than the women he had known best, and she was ineffably beautiful and consoling. She filled the poor room with her presence, the effect of which was as soothing as some odour of incense. She was as quiet as an affectionate sister, and there was no surprise in her being there. Nothing more real had ever befallen him, and nothing, somehow, more reassuring. He felt

her hand rest upon his own, and all his senses seemed to open to her message. She struck him, in the strangest way, both as his creation and as his inspirer, and she gave him the happiest consciousness of success. If she was so charming, in the red firelight, in her vague, clear-coloured garments, it was because he had made her so, and yet if the weight seemed lifted from his spirit it was because she drew it away. When she bent her deep eyes upon him they seemed to speak of safety and freedom and to make a green garden of the future. From time to time she smiled and said: "I live—I live—I live." How long she stayed he couldn't have told, but when his landlady blundered in with the lamp Nona Vincent was no longer there. He rubbed his eyes, but no dream had ever been so intense; and as he slowly got out of his chair it was with a deep still joy—the joy of the artist—in the thought of how right he had been, how exactly like herself he had made her. She had come to show him that. At the end of five minutes, however, he felt sufficiently mystified to call his landlady back—he wanted to ask her a question. When the good woman reappeared the question hung fire an instant; then it shaped itself as the inquiry:

"Has any lady been here?"

"No, sir—no lady at all."

The woman seemed slightly scandalised. "Not Miss Vincent?"

"Miss Vincent, sir?"

"The young lady of my play, don't you know?"

"Oh, sir, you mean Miss Violet Grey!"

"No I don't, at all. I think I mean Mrs. Alsager."

"There has been no Mrs. Alsager, sir."

"Nor anybody at all like her?"

The woman looked at him as if she wondered what had suddenly taken him. Then she asked in an injured tone: "Why shouldn't I have told you if you'd 'ad callers, sir?"

"I thought you might have thought I was asleep."

"Indeed you were, sir, when I came in with the lamp—and well you'd earned it, Mr. Wayworth!"

The landlady came back an hour later to bring him a telegram; it was just as he had begun to dress to dine at his club and go down to the theatre.

“See me to-night in front, and don’t come near me till it’s over.”

It was in these words that Violet communicated her wishes for the evening. He obeyed them to the letter; he watched her from the depths of a box. He was in no position to say how she might have struck him the night before, but what he saw during these charmed hours filled him with admiration and gratitude. She was in it, this time; she had pulled herself together, she had taken possession, she was felicitous at every turn. Fresh from his revelation of Nona he was in a position to judge, and as he judged he exulted. He was thrilled and carried away, and he was moreover intensely curious to know what had happened to her, by what unfathomable art she had managed in a few hours to effect such a change of base. It was as if she had had a revelation of Nona, so convincing a clearness had been breathed upon the picture. He kept himself quiet in the entr’actes—he would speak to her only at the end; but before the play was half over the manager burst into his box.

“It’s prodigious, what she’s up to!” cried Mr. Loder, almost more bewildered than gratified. “She has gone in for a new reading—a blessed somersault in the air!”

“Is it quite different?” Wayworth asked, sharing his mystification.

“Different? Hyperion to a satyr! It’s devilish good, my boy!”

“It’s devilish good,” said Wayworth, “and it’s in a different key altogether from the key of her rehearsal.”

“I’ll run you six months!” the manager declared; and he rushed round again to the actress, leaving Wayworth with a sense that she had already pulled him through. She had with the audience an immense personal success.

When he went behind, at the end, he had to wait for her; she only showed herself when she was ready to leave the theatre. Her aunt had been in her dressing-room with her, and the two ladies appeared together. The girl passed him quickly, motioning him to say nothing till they should have got out of the place. He saw that she was immensely excited, lifted altogether above her common artistic level. The old lady said to him: “You must come home to supper with us: it has been all arranged.” They had a brougham, with a little third seat, and he got into it with them. It was a long time before the actress would speak. She leaned back in her corner, giving no sign but still heaving a little, like a subsiding sea, and with all her triumph in the eyes that shone through the darkness. The old lady was hushed to awe, or at least to discretion, and Wayworth was happy enough to wait. He had really to wait till they had alighted at Notting Hill, where the elder of his companions went to see that supper had been attended to.

"I was better—I was better," said Violet Grey, throwing off her cloak in the little drawing-room.

"You were perfection. You'll be like that every night, won't you?"

She smiled at him. "Every night? There can scarcely be a miracle every day."

"What do you mean by a miracle?"

"I've had a revelation."

Wayward stared. "At what hour?"

"The right hour—this afternoon. Just in time to save me—and to save _you_."

"At five o'clock? Do you mean you had a visit?"

"She came to me—she stayed two hours."

"Two hours? Nona Vincent?"

"Mrs. Alsager." Violet Grey smiled more deeply. "It's the same thing."

"And how did Mrs. Alsager save you?"

"By letting me look at her. By letting me hear her speak. By letting me know her."

"And what did she say to you?"

"Kind things—encouraging, intelligent things."

"Ah, the dear woman!" Wayworth cried.

"You ought to like her—she likes _you_. She was just what I wanted," the actress added.

"Do you mean she talked to you about Nona?"

"She said you thought she was like her. She _is_—she's exquisite."

"She's exquisite," Wayworth repeated. "Do you mean she tried to coach you?"

"Oh, no—she only said she would be so glad if it would help me to see her. And I felt it did help me. I don't know what took place—she only sat there, and she held my hand and smiled at me, and she had tact and

grace, and she had goodness and beauty, and she soothed my nerves and lighted up my imagination. Somehow she seemed to _give_ it all to me. I took it—I took it. I kept her before me, I drank her in. For the first time, in the whole study of the part, I had my model—I could make my copy. All my courage came back to me, and other things came that I hadn't felt before. She was different—she was delightful; as I've said, she was a revelation. She kissed me when she went away—and you may guess if I kissed _her_. We were awfully affectionate, but it's _you_ she likes!" said Violet Grey.

Wayworth had never been more interested in his life, and he had rarely been more mystified. "Did she wear vague, clear-coloured garments?" he asked, after a moment.

Violet Grey stared, laughed, then bade him go in to supper. "_You_ know how she dresses!"

He was very well pleased at supper, but he was silent and a little solemn. He said he would go to see Mrs. Alsager the next day. He did so, but he was told at her door that she had returned to Torquay. She remained there all winter, all spring, and the next time he saw her his play had run two hundred nights and he had married Violet Grey. His plays sometimes succeed, but his wife is not in them now, nor in any others. At these representations Mrs. Alsager continues frequently to be present.

BUBBLES

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I

[Tommy Hawkins was not so sober that you could tell it on him. Certainly his friend Jack Dobson, calling on him one dreary winter evening--an evening of that winter before John Barleycorn cried maudlin tears into his glass and kissed America good-by--would never have guessed it from Tommy's occupation. Presenting himself at Tommy's door and finding it unlocked, Jack had gone on in. A languid splashing guided him to the bathroom. In the tub sat Tommy with the water up to his shoulders, blowing soap bubbles.

"You darned old fool!" said Jack. "Aren't you ever going to grow up, Tommy?"

"Nope," said Tommy placidly. "What for?" Sitting on a chair close by the bathtub was a shallow silver dish with a cake of soap and some

reddish-colored suds in it. Tommy had bought the dish to give some one for a wedding present, and then had forgotten to send it.

“What makes the suds red?” asked Jack.

“I poured a lot of that nose-and-throat spray stuff into it,” explained Tommy. “It makes them prettier. Look!”

As a pipe he was using a piece of hollow brass curtain rod six or eight inches long and of about the diameter of a fat lead pencil. He soused this thing in the reddish suds and manufactured a bubble with elaborate care. With a graceful gesture of his wet arm he gently waved the rod until the bubble detached itself. It floated in the air for a moment, and the thin, reddish integument caught the light from the electric globe and gave forth a brief answering flash as of fire. Then the bubble suddenly and whimsically dashed itself against the wall and was no more, leaving a faint, damp, reddish trace upon the white plaster.

“Air current caught it,” elucidated Tommy with the air of a circus proprietor showing off pet elephants. In his most facetious moments Tommy was wont to hide his childish soul beneath an exterior of serious dignity. “This old dump is full of air currents. They come in round the windows, come in round the doors, come right in through the walls. Damned annoying, too, for a scientist making experiments with bubbles--starts a bubble and never knows which way it's going to jump. I'm gonna complain to the management of this hotel.”

“You're going to come out of that bathtub and get into your duds,” said Jack. “That water's getting cool now, and between cold water and air currents you'll have pneumonia the first thing you know--you poor silly fish, you.”

“Speaking of fish,” said Tommy elliptically, “there's a bottle of cocktails on the mantel in the room there. Forgot it for a moment. Don't want to be inhospitable, but don't drink all of it.”

“It's all gone,” said Dobson a moment later.

“So?” said Tommy in surprise. “That's the way with cocktails. Here one minute and gone the next--like bubbles. Bubbles! Life's like that, Jack!” He made another bubble with great solemnity, watched it float and dart and burst. “Pouf!” he said. “Bubbles! Bubbles! Life's like that!”

“You're an original philosopher, you are,” said Jack, seizing him by the shoulders. “You're about as original as a valentine. Douse yourself with cold water and rub yourself down and dress. Come out of it, kid, or you'll be sick.”

“If I get sick,” said Tommy, obeying, nevertheless, “I won't have to go

to work to-morrow.”

“Why aren't you working to-day?” asked his friend, working on him with a coarse towel.

“Day off,” said Tommy.

“Day off!” rejoined Dobson. “Since when has the Morning Despatch been giving two days off a week to its reporters? You had your day off Tuesday, and this is Thursday.”

“Is it?” said Tommy. “I always get Tuesday and Thursday mixed. Both begin with a T. Hey, Jack, how's that? Both begin with a T! End with a tea party! Good line, hey, Jack? Tuesday and Thursday both begin with a T and end with a tea party. I'm gonna write a play round that, Jack. Broadway success! Letters a foot high! Royalties for both of us! I won't forget you, Jack! You suggested the idea for the plot, Jack. Drag you out in front of the curtain with me when I make my speech. 'Author! Author!' yells the crowd. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' says I, 'here is the obscure and humble person who set in motion the train of thought that led to my writing this masterpiece. Such as he is, I introduce him to you.’”

“Shut up!” said Jack, and continued to lacerate Tommy's hide with the rough towel. “Hold still! Now go and get into your clothes.” And as Tommy began to dress he regarded that person darkly. “You're a brilliant wag, you are! It's a shame the way the copy readers down on the Despatch keep your best things out of print, you splattering supermudhen of journalism, you! You'll wake up some morning without any more job than a kaiser.” And as Tommy threaded himself into the mystic maze of his garments Mr. Dobson continued to look at him and mutter disgustedly, “Bubbles!”

Not that he was afraid that Tommy would actually lose his job. If it had been possible for Tommy to lose his job that must have happened years before. But Tommy wrote a certain joyous type of story better than any other person in New York, and his facetiousness got him out of as many scrapes as it got him into. He was thirty years old. At ninety he would still be experimenting with the visible world in a spirit of random eagerness, joshing everything in it, including himself. He looked exactly like the young gentleman pictured in a widely disseminated collar advertisement. He enjoyed looking that way, and occasionally he enjoyed talking as if he were exactly that kind of person. He loved to turn his ironic levity against the character he seemed to be, much as the mad wags who grace the column of F. P. A. delight in getting their sayings across accompanied by a gentle satirical fillip at all mad waggery.

“Speaking of bubbles,” he suddenly chuckled as he carefully adjusted his

tie in the collar that looked exactly like the one in the advertisement, "there's an old party in the next room that takes 'em more seriously than you do, Jack."

The old downtown hotel in which Tommy lived had once been a known and noted hostelry, and persons from Plumville, Pennsylvania, Griffin, Georgia, and Galva, Illinois, still stopped there when in New York, because their fathers and mothers had stopped there on their wedding journeys perhaps. It was not such a very long way from the Eden Musee, when there was an Eden Musee. Tommy's room had once formed part of a suite. The bathroom which adjoined it had belonged jointly to another room in the suite. But now these two rooms were always let separately. Still, however, the bathroom was a joint affair. When Tommy wished to bathe he must first insure privacy by hooking on the inside the door that led into the bathroom from the chamber beyond.

"Old party in the next room?" questioned Jack.

"Uh-huh," said Tommy, who had benefited by his cold sluicing and his rubdown. "I gave him a few bubbles for his very own--through the keyhole into his room, you know. Poked that brass rod through and blew the bubble in his room. Detached it with a little jerk and let it float. Seemed more sociable, you know, to let him in on the fun. Never be stingy with your pleasures, Jack. Shows a mean spirit--a mean soul. Why not cheer the old party up with soap bubbles? Cost little, bubbles do. More than likely he's a stranger in New York. Unfriendly city, he thinks. Big city. Nobody thinks of him. Nobody cares for him. Away from home. Winter day. Melancholy. Well, I say, give him a bubble now and then. Shows some one is thinking of him. Shows the world isn't so thoughtless and gloomy after all. Neighborly sort of thing to do, Jack. Makes him think of his youth--home--mother's knee--all that kind of thing, Jack. Cheers him up. Sat in the tub there and got to thinking of him. Almost cried, Jack, when I thought how lonely the old man must be--got one of these old man's voices. Whiskers. Whiskers deduced from the voice. So I climbed out of the tub every ten or fifteen minutes all afternoon and gave the old man a bubble. Rain outside--fog, sleet. Dark indoors. Old man sits and thinks nobody loves him. Along comes a bubble. Old man gets happy. Laughs. Remembers his infancy. Skies clear. You think I'm a selfish person, Jack? I'm not. I'm a Samaritan. Where will we eat?"

"You are a darned fool," said Jack. "You say he took them seriously? What do you mean? Did he like 'em?"

"Couldn't quite make out," said Tommy. "But they moved him. Gaspd every now and then. Think he prayed. Emotion, Jack. Probably made him think of boyhood's happy days down on the farm. Heard him talking to himself. Think he cried. Went to bed anyhow with his clothes on and pulled the covers over his head. Looked through the keyhole and saw that. Gray

whiskers sticking up, and that's all. Deduced the whiskers from the voice, Jack. Let's give the old party a couple more bubbles and then go eat. It's been an hour since he's had one. Thinks I'm forgetting him, no doubt."

So they gave the old man a couple of bubbles, poking the brass rod through the keyhole of the door.

The result was startling and unexpected. First there came a gasp from the other room, a sort of whistling release of the breath, and an instant later a high, whining, nasal voice.

"Oh, God! God! Again! You meant it, then, God! You meant it!"

The two young men started back and looked at each other in wonderment. There was such a quivering agony, such an utter groveling terror in this voice from the room beyond that they were daunted.

"What's eating him?" asked Dobson, instinctively dropping his tones to a whisper.

"I don't know," said Tommy, temporarily subdued. "Sounds like that last one shell-shocked him when it exploded, doesn't it?"

But Tommy was subdued only for a moment.

As they went out into the corridor he giggled and remarked, "Told you he took 'em seriously, Jack."

II

"Seriously" was a word scarcely strong enough for the way in which the old party in the room beyond had taken it, though he had not, in fact, seen the bubble. He had only seen a puff of smoke coming apparently from nowhere, originating in the air itself, as it seemed to him, manifesting itself, materializing itself out of nothing, and floating in front of the one eye which was peeping fearfully out of the huddled bedclothing which he had drawn over himself. He had lain quaking on the bed, waiting for this puff of smoke for an hour or more, hoping against hope that it would not come, praying and muttering, knotting his bony hands in the whiskers that Tommy had seen sticking up from the coverings, twisting convulsively.

Tommy had whimsically filled the bubble, as he blew it, with smoke from his cigarette. He had in like manner, throughout the afternoon and early-evening, filled all the bubbles that he had given the old man with cigarette or pipe smoke. The old party had not been bowled over

by anything in Tommy's tobacco. He had not noticed that the smoke was tobacco smoke, for he had been smoking a pipe himself the greater part of the day, and had not aired out the room. It was neither bubbles nor tobacco that had flicked a raw spot on his soul. It was smoke.

III

Bubbles! They seemed to be in Tommy's brain. Perhaps it was the association of ideas that made him think of champagne. At any rate he declared that he must have some, and vetoed his friend's suggestion that they dine--as they frequently did--at one of the little Italian table d'hote places in Greenwich Village.

"You're a bubble and I'm a bubble and the world is a bubble," Tommy was saying a little later as he watched the gas stirring in his golden drink.

They had gone to the genial old Brevoort, which was--but why tell persons who missed the Brevoort in its mellower days what they missed, and why cause anguished yearnings in the bosoms of those who knew it well?

"Tommy," said his friend, "don't, if you love me, hand out any more of your jejune poeticism or musical-comedy philosophy. I'll agree with you that the world is a bubble for the sake of argument, if you'll change the record. I want to eat, and nothing interferes with my pleasure in a meal so much as this line of pseudocerebration that you seem to have adopted lately."

"Bubbles seem trivial things, Jack," went on Tommy, altogether unperturbed. "But I have a theory that there aren't any trivial things. I like to think of the world balancing itself on a trivial thing. Look at the Kaiser, for instance. A madman. Well, let's say there's been a blood clot in his brain for years--a little trivial thing the size of a pin point, Jack. It hooks up with the wrong brain cell; it gets into the wrong channel, and--pouf! The world goes to war. A thousand million people are affected by it--by that one little clot of blood no bigger than a pin point that gets into the wrong channel. An atom! A planet balanced on an atom! A star pivoting on a molecule!"

"Have some soup," said his friend.

"Bubbles! Bubbles and butterflies!" continued Tommy. "Some day, Jack, I'm going to write a play in which a butterfly's wing brushes over an empire."

"No, you're not," said Jack. "You're just going to talk about it and

think you're writing it and peddle the idea round to everybody you know, and then finally some wise guy is going to grab it off and really write it. You've been going to write a play ever since I knew you."

"Yes, I am; I'm really going to write that play."

"Well, Tommy," said Jack, looking round the chattering dining room, "this is a hell of a place to do it in!"

"Meaning, of course," said Tommy serenely, "that it takes more than a butterfly to write a play about a butterfly."

"You get me," said his friend. And then after a pause he went on with sincerity in his manner: "You know I think you could write the play, Tommy. But unless you get to work on some of your ideas pretty soon, and buckle down to them in earnest, other people will continue to write your plays--and you will continue to josh them and yourself, and your friends will continue to think that you could write better plays if you would only do it. People aren't going to take you seriously, Tommy, till you begin to take yourself a little seriously. Why, you poor, futile, silly, misguided, dear old mutt, you! You don't even have sense enough--you don't have the moral continuity, if you follow me--to stay sore at a man that does you dirt! Now, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Tommy a little more seriously.

"Well now, do you?" persisted his friend. "I don't say it's good Christian doctrine not to forgive people. It isn't. But I've seen people put things across on you, Tommy, and seen you laugh it off and let 'em be friends with you again inside of six weeks. I couldn't do it, and nine-tenths of the fellows we know couldn't do it; and in the way you do it it shouldn't be done. You should at least remember, even if you do forgive; remember well enough not to get bit by the same dog again. With you, old kid, it's all a part of your being a butterfly and a bubble. It's no particular virtue in you. I wouldn't talk to you like a Dutch uncle if I didn't think you had it in you to make good. But you've got to be prodded."

"There's one fellow that did me dirt," said Tommy musingly, "that I've never taken to my bosom again."

"What did you do to him?" asked his friend. "Beat him to death with a butterfly's wing, Tommy, or blow him out of existence with a soap bubble?"

"I've never done anything to him," said Tommy soberly. "And I don't think I ever would do anything to him. I just remember, that's all. If he ever gets his come-uppance, as they say in the rural districts, it won't be through any act of mine. Let life take revenge for me. I never

will.”

“I suppose you're right,” said Dobson. “But who was this guy? And what did he do to you?”

IV

“He was--and is--my uncle,” said Tommy, “and he did about everything to me. Listen! You think I do nothing but flitter, flutter, frivol and flivver! And you may be right, and maybe I never will do anything else. Maybe I never will be anything but a kid.

“I was young when I was born. No, that's not one of my silly lines, Jack. I mean it seriously. I was young when I was born. I was born with a jolly disposition. But this uncle of mine took it out of me. I'll say he did! The reason I'm such a kid now, Jack, is because I had to grow up when I was about five years old, and I stayed grown up until I was seventeen or eighteen. I never had a chance to be a boy. If I showed any desire to be it was knocked out of me on the spot. And if I live two hundred years, and stay nineteen years old all that time, Jack, I won't any more than make up for the childhood I missed--that was stolen from me. Frivol? I could frivol a thousand years and not dull my appetite. I want froth, Jack: froth and bubbles!

“This old uncle of mine--he wasn't so old in years when I first knew him, but in his soul he was as old as the overseers who whipped the slaves that built Cheops' pyramid, and as sandy and as flinty--hated me as soon as he saw me. He hated me before he saw me. He would have hated me if he had never seen me, because I was young and happy and careless.

“I was that, when I went to live with him--young and happy and careless. I was five years old. He was my father's brother, Uncle Ezra was, and he beat my father out of money in his dirty, underhanded way. Oh, nothing illegal! At least, I suppose not. Uncle Ezra was too cautious to do anything that might be found out on him. There was nothing that my mother could prove, at any rate, and my father had been careless and had trusted him. When my father died my mother was ill. He gave us a home, Uncle Ezra did. She had to live somewhere; she had to have a roof over her head and attention of some sort. She had no near relations, and I had to be looked after.

“So she and I went into his house to live. It was to be temporary. We were to move as soon as she got better. But she did not live long. I don't remember her definitely as she was before we went to live with Uncle Ezra. I can only see her as she lay on a bed in a dark room before she died. It was a large wooden bed, with wooden slats and a straw mattress. I can see myself sitting on a chair by the head of the bed and

talking to her. My feet did not reach to the floor by any means; they only reached to the chair rungs. I can't remember what she said or what I said. All I remember of her is that she had very bright eyes and that her arms were thin. I remember her arms, but not her face, except the eyes. I suppose she used to reach her arms out to me. I think she must have been jolly at one time, too. There is a vague feeling, a remembrance, that before we went to Uncle Ezra's she was jolly, and that she and I laughed and played together in some place where there was red-clover bloom.

“One day when I was sitting on the chair, the door opened and Uncle Ezra came in. There was some man with him that was, I suppose, a doctor. I can recall Uncle Ezra's false grin and the way he put his hand on my head--to impress the doctor, I suppose--and the way I pulled away from him. For I felt that he disliked me, and I feared and hated him.

“Yes, Uncle Ezra gave us a home. I don't know how much you know about the rural districts, Jack. But when an Uncle Ezra in a country town gives some one a home he acquires merit. This was a little town in Pennsylvania that I'm talking about, and Uncle Ezra was a prominent citizen--deacon in the church and all that sort of thing. Truly rural drama stuff, Jack, but I can't help that--it's true. Uncle Ezra had a reputation for being stingy and mean. Giving us a home was a good card for him to play. My mother had a little money, and he stole that, too, when she died.

“I suppose he stole it legally. I don't know. It wasn't much. No one had any particular interest in looking out for me, and nobody would want to start anything in opposition to Uncle Ezra in that town if it could be helped anyhow. He didn't have the whole village and the whole of the farming country round about sewed up, all by himself, but he was one of the little group that did. There's a gang like that in every country town, I imagine. He was one of four or five big ducks in that little puddle--lent money, took mortgages and all that kind of thing you read about. I don't know how much he is worth now, counting what he has been stealing all his life. But it can't be a staggering sum. He's too cowardly to plunge or take a long chance. He steals and saves and grinds in a little way. He is too mean and small and blind and limited in his intelligence to be a big, really successful crook, such as you will find in New York City.

“When my mother died, of course, I stayed with Uncle Ezra. I suppose everybody said how good it was of him to keep me, and that it showed a soft and kindly spot in his nature after all, and that he couldn't be so hard as he had the name of being. But I don't see what else could have been done with me, unless he had taken me out and dropped me in the mill pond like a blind cat. Sometimes I used to wish he had done that.

“It isn't hard to put a five-year-old kid in the wrong, so as to make it

appear--even to the child himself--that he is bad and disobedient. Uncle Ezra began that way with me. I'm not going into details. This isn't a howl; it's merely an explanation. But he persecuted me in every way. He put me to work before I should have known what work was--work too hard for me. He deviled me and he beat me, he clothed me like a beggar and he fed me like a dog, he robbed me of childhood and of boyhood. I won't go over the whole thing.

"I never had decent shoes, or a hat that wasn't a rag, and I never went to kid parties or anything, or even owned so much as an air rifle of my own. The only pair of skates I ever had, Jack, I made for myself out of two old files, with the help of the village blacksmith--and I got licked for that. Uncle Ezra said I had stolen the files and the straps. They belonged to him.

"But there's one thing I remember with more of anger than any other. He used to make me kneel down and pray every night before I went to bed, in his presence; and sometimes he would pray with me. He was a deacon in the church. There are plenty of them on the square--likely most of them are. But this one was the kind you used to see in the old-fashioned melodramas. Truly rural stuff, Jack. He used to be quite a shark at prayer himself, Uncle Ezra did. I can remember how he looked when he prayed, with his eyes shut and his Adam's apple bobbing up and down and the sound whining through his nose.

"The only person that was ever human to me was a woman I called Aunt Lizzie. I don't know really what relation she was to me; a distant cousin of Uncle Ezra's, I think. She was half blind and she was deaf, and he bullied her and made her do all the housework. She was bent nearly double with drudgery. He had given her a home, too. She didn't dare be very good to me. He might find it out, and then we both would catch it. She baked me some apple dumplings once on one of my birthdays. I was nine years old. And he said she had stolen the apples and flour from him; that he had not ordered her to make any apple dumplings, and it was theft; and he made me pray for her, and made her pray for herself, and he prayed for both of us in family prayers every day for a week.

"I was nearly eighteen when I ran away. I might have done it sooner, but I was small for my age, and I was cowed. I didn't dare to call my soul my own, and I had a reputation for being queer, too. For I used to grin and laugh at things no one else thought were funny--when Uncle Ezra wasn't round. I suppose people in that town thought it was odd that I could laugh at all. No one could understand how I had a laugh left in me. But when I was alone I used to laugh. I used to laugh at myself sometimes because I was so little and so queer. When I was seventeen I wasn't much bigger than a thirteen-year-old kid should be. I packed a lot of growing into the years between seventeen and twenty-one.

“When I ran away Aunt Lizzie gave me eighty-seven cents, all in nickels and pennies, and there were two or three of those old-fashioned two-cent pieces in it, too, that she had had for God knows how long. It was all she had. I don't suppose he ever paid her anything at all, and the wonder was she had that much. I told her that when I got out into the world and made good I would come and get her, but she shivered all over with fright at the idea of daring to leave. I have sent her things from time to time in the last ten years--money, and dresses I have bought for her, and little things I thought she would like. But I don't know whether he let her have them or not I never got any letter from her at all. I don't even know whether she can write, to tell the truth, and she wouldn't dare get one of the neighbors to write for her. But if I ever make any real money, Jack, I am going to go and get her, whether she dares to come away or not.

“Well, when I left, the thing I wanted to do was go to school. Uncle Ezra hadn't given me time to go to school much. But I tramped to a town where there was a little fresh-water college that had its own prep school attached, and I did the whole seven years of prep school and college in five years. You see, I had a lot of bounce in me. The minute I got away from Uncle Ezra the whole world brightened up for me. The clouds rolled by and life looked like one grand long joke, and I turned into a kid. I romped through that prep school and that college, and made my own living while I was doing it, and laughed all the time and loved the world and everything in it, and it came as easy to me as water comes to a duck. I came on down here to New York and was lucky enough to get a chance as a reporter, and I've been romping ever since.

“I don't want to do anything but romp. Of course, I want to write some good stuff some day, but I want to keep romping while I write it, and I want it to be stuff that has a romp in it, too. You say I romp so much I'm never serious. Well, I do have some serious moments, too. I have a dream that keeps coming to me. I dream that I'm back in that little town, and that I'm Uncle Ezra's slave again, and that I can't get away.

“Sometimes the dream takes the form of Uncle Ezra coming here to New York to get me, and I know that I've got to go back with him to that place, and I wake up sweating and crying like an eight-year-old kid. If he ever really came it would put a crimp into me, Jack.

“You say I'm a butterfly. And I say, yes, Jack, thank God I am! I used to be a grubworm, and now I'm a butterfly, praise heaven!

“Well, that's the guy I hold the grudge against, and that's why I'm fool enough to rush into every pleasure I can find. I don't know that I'll ever change. And as for the man, I don't ever want to see him. I don't know that I'd ever do anything to him if I did--beat him to death with a butterfly's wing, or blow him up with a soap bubble, as you suggested. Let him alone. He'll punish himself. He is punished by being what he is.

I wouldn't put a breath into the scale one way or the other--not even a puff of cigarette smoke."

He blew a breath of cigarette smoke luxuriously out of his nose as he finished, and then he remarked, "Let's go somewhere and dance."

"Nazimova is doing Ibsen uptown," suggested Jack, "and I have a couple of tickets. Let's go and see Ibsen lb a little."

"Nope," said Tommy. "Ibsen's got too much sense. I want something silly. Me for a cabaret, or some kind of a hop garden."

V

But sometimes in this ironical world it happens that we have already beaten a man to death with a butterfly's wing, slain him with a bubble, sent him whirling into the hereafter on a puff of smoke, even as we are saying that such a thing is foreign to our thoughts.

The old party in the room next to Tommy's at the hotel had arrived the day before, with an umbrella, a straw suitcase and a worried eye on either side his long, white, chalkish, pitted nose. He seemed chilly in spite of his large plum-colored overcoat, of a cut that has survived only in the rural districts. He wore a salient, assertive beard, that had once been sandy and was now almost white, but it was the only assertive thing about him. His manner was far from aggressive.

An hour after he had been shown to his room he appeared at the desk again and inquired timidly of the clerk, "There's a fire near here?"

"Little blaze in the next block. Doesn't amount to anything," said the clerk.

"I heard the--the engines," said the guest apologetically.

"Doesn't amount to anything," said the clerk again. And then, "Nervous about fire?"

The old party seemed startled.

"Who? Me? Why should I be nervous about fire? No! No! No!" He beat a sudden retreat. "I was just asking--just asking," he threw back over his shoulder.

"Old duck's scared of fire and ashamed to own it," mused the clerk, watching him out of the lobby.

The old party went back to his room, and there one of the first things he saw was a copy of the Bible lying on the bureau. There is an organization which professes for its object the placing of a Bible in every hotel room in the land. The old party had his own Bible with him. As if reminded of it by the one on the bureau, he took it out of his suitcase and sat down and began to turn the leaves like a person familiar with the book--and like a person in need of comfort, as indeed he was.

There was a text in Matthew that he sought--where was it? Somewhere in the first part of Matthew's gospel--ah, here it is: The twelfth chapter and the thirty-first verse:

“All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men....”

There is a terrible reservation in the same verse. He kept his eyes from it, and read the first part over and over, forming the syllables with his lips, but not speaking aloud.

“All manner of sin--all manner of sin-----”

And then, as if no longer able to avoid it, he yielded his consciousness to the latter clause of the verse:

“But the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.”

What was blasphemy against the Holy Ghost? Could what he had done be construed as that? Probably if one lied to God in his prayers, that was blasphemy against the Holy Ghost--one form of it. And had he been lying to God these last two weeks when he had said over and over again in his prayers that it was all a mistake? It hadn't been all a mistake, but the worst part of it had been a mistake.

He went out for his dinner that evening, but he was in again before ten o'clock. He could not have slept well. At two o'clock in the morning he appeared in front of the desk.

He had heard fire engines again.

“See here,” said the night clerk, appraising him, as the day clerk had done, as a rube who had been seldom to the city and was nervous about fire, “you don't need to be worried. If anything should happen near here we'd get all the guests out in a jiffy.”

The old party returned to his room. He was up early the next morning and down to breakfast before the dining room was open.

He did not look as if he had had much rest. The morning hours he devoted

to reading his Bible in his room. Perhaps he found comfort in it. At noon he seemed a bit more cheerful. He asked the clerk the way to the Eden Musee, and was surprised to learn that that place of amusement had been closed for a year or two. The clerk recommended a moving-picture house round the corner. But it had begun to rain and snow and sleet all together; the sky was dark and the wind was rising; the old party elected not to go out after all.

He went back to his room once more, and his black fear and melancholy descended upon him again, and the old debate began to weave through his brain anew. For two weeks he had been fleeing from the debate and from himself. He had come to New York to get away from it, but it was no good. Just when he had made up his mind that God had forgiven him, and was experiencing a momentary respite, some new doubt would assail him and the agony would begin again.

The old debate--he had burned the store, with the living quarters over it, to get the insurance money, after having removed a part of the insured goods, but he did not regard that as an overwhelming sin. It wasn't right, of course, in one way. And yet in another way it was merely sharp business practice, so he told himself. For a year before that, when one of his buildings had burned through accident, he had been forced to accept from the same insurance company less than was actually due him as a matter of equity. Therefore, to make money out of that company by a shrewd trick was in a way merely to get back his own again. It wasn't the sort of thing that a deacon in the church would care to have found out on him, of course. It was wrong in a sense. But it was the wrong that it had led to that worried him.

It was the old woman's death that worried him. He hadn't meant to burn her to death, God knows! He hadn't known she was in the building.

He had sent her on a week's visit to another town, to see a surprised cousin of his own, and it had been distinctly understood that she was not to return until Saturday. But some time on Friday evening she must have crept back home and gone to bed in her room. He had not known she was there.

"I didn't know! I didn't know!"

There were times when he gibbered the words to himself by the hour.

It was at midnight that he had set fire to the place. The old woman was deaf. Even when the flames began to crackle she could not have heard them. She had had no more chance than a rat in a trap. The old fool! It was her own fault! Why had she not obeyed him? Why had she come creeping back, like a deaf old half-blind tabby cat, to die in the flames? It was her own fault! When he thought of the way she had returned to kill herself there were moments when he cursed and hated her.

But had she killed herself? Back and forth swung the inner argument. At times he saw clearly enough that this incident joined on without a break to the texture of his whole miserable life; when he recognized that, though it might be an accident in a strictly literal sense that the old woman was dead, yet it was the sort of accident for which his previous existence had been a preparation. Even while he fiercely denied his guilt, or talked of it in a seizure of whining prayer that was essentially a lying denial, he knew that guilt there was.

Would he be forgiven? There were comforting passages in the Bible. He switched on the rather insufficient electric light, which was all the old hotel provided, for the day was too dark to read without that help, and turned the pages of the New Testament through and through again.

At three o'clock in the afternoon he was sitting on the edge of his bed, with the book open in front of him and his head bowed, almost dozing. His pipe, with which he had filled the room with the fumes of tobacco, had fallen to the floor. Perhaps it was weariness, but for a brief period his sharper sense of fear had been somewhat stilled again. Maybe it was going to be like this--a gradual easing off of the strain in answer to his prayers. He had asked God for an answer as to whether he should be forgiven, and God was answering in this way, so he told himself. God was going to let him get some sleep, and maybe when he woke everything would be all right again--bearable at least.

So he mused, half asleep.

And then all at once he sprang wide awake again, and his terror awakened with him. For suddenly in front of his half-shut eyes, coming from nowhere in particular, there passed a puff of smoke!

What could it mean? He had asked God for an answer. He had been lulled for a moment almost into something like peace, and--now--this puff of smoke! Was it a sign? Was it God's answer?

He sat up on the edge of the bed, rigid, in a cold, still agony of superstitious fright. He dared not move or turn his head. He was afraid that he would see--something--if he looked behind him. He was afraid that he would in another moment hear something--a voice!

He closed his eyes. He prayed. He prayed aloud. His eyes once closed, he scarcely dared open them again. After some minutes he began to tell himself that perhaps he had been mistaken; perhaps he had not seen smoke at all. Perhaps even if he had seen smoke it was due to some explicable cause, and not meant for him.

He greatly dared. He opened his eyes. And drifting lazily above the white pillow at the head of the bed was another puff of smoke.

He rocked back and forth upon the bed, with his arms up as if to shield his head from a physical blow, and then he passed in a moment from the quakings of fear to a kind of still certainty of doom. God was angry at him. God was telling him so. God would send the devil for him. There was no further doubt. He would go to hell--to hell! To burn forever! Forever--even as the old woman had burned for a quarter of an hour. He began to search through the pages of the Bible again, not for words of comfort this time, but in a morbid ecstasy of despair, for phrases about hell, for verses that mentioned fire and flames.

He did not need the concordance. He knew his Bible well, and his fear helped him. Consciousness and subconsciousness joined to guide his fingers and eyes in the quest.

"Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming," he read in Isaiah, and he took it to himself.

"Yea, I will gather you, and blow upon you in the fire of my wrath, and ye shall be melted in the midst thereof," he read in Ezekiel.

He had a literal imagination, and he had a literal belief, and at every repetition of the word "fire" the flesh cringed and crawled on his bones. God! To burn! How it must hurt!

"And the God that answereth by fire, let Him be God," met his eyes in the first book of Kings.

And it all meant him. Now and then over his shoulder would float another little puff of smoke; and once, lifting his head suddenly from poring over the book, he thought he saw something that moved and glinted like a traveling spark, and was gone.

He began to feel himself in hell already. This was the foretaste, that was all. Would he begin to burn even before he died? Did this smoke presage something of that kind? Would flames physically seize upon him, and would he burn, even as the old woman had burned?

Suddenly in his hysteria there came a revulsion--a revolt. Having reached the nethermost depths of despair, he began to move upward a little. His soul stirred and took a step and tried to climb. He began to pray once more. After all, the Good Book did promise mercy! He began to dare to pray again. And he prayed in a whisper that now and then broke into a whine--a strange prayer, characteristic of the man.

"Oh, God," he cried, "you promise forgiveness in that book there, and I'm gonna hold you to it! I'm gonna hold you to it! It's down there in black and white, your own words, God, and I'm gonna hold you to it! It's a contract, God, and you ain't the kind of a man, God, to go back on a

contract that's down in black and white!”

Thus he prayed, with a naïve, unconscious blasphemy. And after long minutes of this sort of thing his soul dared take another step. A faint, far glimmering of hope came to him where he groveled. For he was groveling on the bed now, with the covers pulled up to his head and his hand upon the open Bible. He found the courage to peer from beneath the covers at intervals as he prayed and muttered, and minutes passed with no more smoke. Had the smoke ceased? The sound of his own murmuring voice began to reassure him. The smoke had certainly ceased! It had been twenty minutes since he had seen it--half an hour!

What could it mean? That God was hearkening to his prayer?

An hour went by, and still there was no more sign of smoke. He prayed feverishly, he gabbled, as if by the rapidity of his utterance and the repeated strokes of his words he were beating back and holding at bay the smoke that was God's warning and the symbol of his displeasure. And the smoke had ceased to come! He was to be forgiven! He was winning! His prayers were winning for him! At least God was listening!

Yes, that must be it. God was listening now. The smoke had come as a warning; and he had, upon receiving this warning, repented. God had not meant, after all, that he was doomed irrevocably. God had meant that, to be forgiven, his repentance must be genuine, must be thorough--and it was thorough now. Now it was genuine! And the smoke had ceased! The smoke had been a sign, and he had heeded the sign, and now if he kept up his prayers and lived a good life in the future he was to be forgiven. He would not have to burn in hell after all.

The minutes passed, and he prayed steadily, and every minute that went by and brought no further sign of the smoke built up in him a little more hope, another grain of confidence.

An hour and a quarter, and he almost dared be sure that he was forgiven--but he was not quite sure. If he could only be quite sure! He wallowed on the bed, and his hand turned idly the pages of the Bible, lying outside on the coverlet.

More than an hour had gone by. Could he accept it as an indication that God had indeed heard him? He shifted himself upon the bed, and stared up at the ceiling through a chink in the covers as if through and beyond the ceiling he were interrogating heaven.

And lying so, there came a damp touch upon his hand, soft and chill and silent, as if it were delicately and ironically brushed by the kiss of Death. A sudden agony numbed his hand and arm. With the compulsion of hysteria, not to be resisted, his head lifted and he sat up and looked. Over the Bible and his hand that lay upon the open page there floated

again a puff of smoke, and faintly staining his Angers and the paper itself was something moist and red. It stained his Angers and it marked with red for his straining sight this passage of Isaiah:

“The earth also shall disclose her blood.”

It was then he cried out, “Oh, God! God! Again! You meant it, then, God! You meant it.”

It was nearly midnight when Tommy and his friend Dobson returned to the hotel. “Your paper's been trying to get you for an hour, Mr. Hawkins,” said the night clerk when they came in. “Story right in the next room to yours. Old party in there hanged himself.”

“So?” said Tommy. “Ungrateful old guy, he is! I put in the afternoon trying to cheer him up a little.”

“Did you know him?” asked the clerk.

“Nope,” said Tommy, moving toward the elevator.

But a few moments later, confronted with the grotesque spectacle in the room upstairs, he said, “Yes--I--I know him. Jack! Jack! Get me out of here, Jack! It's Uncle Ezra, Jack! He's--he's come for me!”

As has been remarked before, sometimes even a bubble may be a mordant weapon.

"LITTLE SPECK IN GARNERED FRUIT"

The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Voice of the City*, by O. Henry

The honeymoon was at its full. There was a flat with the reddest of new carpets, tasselled portières and six steins with pewter lids arranged on a ledge above the wainscoting of the dining-room. The wonder of it was yet upon them. Neither of them had ever seen a yellow primrose by the river's brim; but if such a sight had met their eyes at that time it would have seemed like--well, whatever the poet expected the right kind of people to see in it besides a primrose.

The bride sat in the rocker with her feet resting upon the world. She was wrapt in rosy dreams and a kimono of the same hue. She wondered what the people in Greenland and Tasmania and Beloochistan were saying one to another about her marriage to Kid McGarry. Not that it made any difference. There was no welter-weight from London to the

Southern Cross that could stand up four hours--no; four rounds--with her bridegroom. And he had been hers for three weeks; and the crook of her little finger could sway him more than the fist of any 142-pounder in the world.

Love, when it is ours, is the other name for self-abnegation and sacrifice. When it belongs to people across the airshaft it means arrogance and self-conceit.

The bride crossed her oxfords and looked thoughtfully at the distemper Cupids on the ceiling.

"Precious," said she, with the air of Cleopatra asking Antony for Rome done up in tissue paper and delivered at residence, "I think I would like a peach."

Kid McGarry arose and put on his coat and hat. He was serious, shaven, sentimental, and spry.

"All right," said he, as coolly as though he were only agreeing to sign articles to fight the champion of England. "I'll step down and cop one out for you--see?"

"Don't be long," said the bride. "I'll be lonesome without my naughty boy. Get a nice, ripe one."

After a series of farewells that would have befitted an imminent voyage to foreign parts, the Kid went down to the street.

Here he not unreasonably hesitated, for the season was yet early spring, and there seemed small chance of wresting anywhere from those chill streets and stores the coveted luscious guerdon of summer's golden prime.

At the Italian's fruit-stand on the corner he stopped and cast a contemptuous eye over the display of papered oranges, highly polished apples and wan, sun-hungry bananas.

"Gotta da peach?" asked the Kid in the tongue of Dante, the lover of lovers.

"Ah, no,--" sighed the vender. "Not for one mont com-a da peach. Too soon. Gotta da nice-a orange. Like-a da orange?"

Scornful, the Kid pursued his quest. He entered the all-night chop-house, café, and bowling-alley of his friend and admirer, Justus O'Callahan. The O'Callahan was about in his institution, looking for leaks.

"I want it straight," said the Kid to him. "The old woman has got a hunch that she wants a peach. Now, if you've got a peach, Cal, get it out quick. I want it and others like it if you've got 'em in plural quantities."

"The house is yours," said O'Callahan. "But there's no peach in it. It's too soon. I don't suppose you could even find 'em at one of the Broadway joints. That's too bad. When a lady fixes her mouth for a certain kind of fruit nothing else won't do. It's too late now to find any of the first-class fruiterers open. But if you think the missis would like some nice oranges I've just got a box of fine ones in that she might--"

"Much obliged, Cal. It's a peach proposition right from the ring of the gong. I'll try further."

The time was nearly midnight as the Kid walked down the West-Side avenue. Few stores were open, and such as were practically hooted at the idea of a peach.

But in her moated flat the bride confidently awaited her Persian fruit. A champion welter-weight not find a peach?--not stride triumphantly over the seasons and the zodiac and the almanac to fetch an Amsden's June or a Georgia cling to his ownny-own?

The Kid's eye caught sight of a window that was lighted and gorgeous with nature's most entrancing colors. The light suddenly went out. The Kid sprinted and caught the fruiterer locking his door.

"Peaches?" said he, with extreme deliberation.

"Well, no, Sir. Not for three or four weeks yet. I haven't any idea where you might find some. There may be a few in town from under the glass, but they'd be hard to locate. Maybe at one of the more expensive hotels--some place where there's plenty of money to waste. I've got some very fine oranges, though--from a shipload that came in to-day."

The Kid lingered on the corner for a moment, and then set out briskly toward a pair of green lights that flanked the steps of a building down a dark side street.

"Captain around anywhere?" he asked of the desk sergeant of the police station.

At that moment the captain came briskly forward from the rear. He was in plain clothes and had a busy air.

"Hello, Kid," he said to the pugilist. "Thought you were

bridal-touring?

"Got back yesterday. I'm a solid citizen now. Think I'll take an interest in municipal doings. How would it suit you to get into Denver Dick's place to-night, Cap?

"Past performances," said the captain, twisting his moustache. "Denver was closed up two months ago."

"Correct," said the Kid. "Rafferty chased him out of the Forty-third. He's running in your precinct now, and his game's bigger than ever. I'm down on this gambling business. I can put you against his game."

"In my precinct?" growled the captain. "Are you sure, Kid? I'll take it as a favor. Have you got the entrée? How is it to be done?"

"Hammers," said the Kid. "They haven't got any steel on the doors yet. You'll need ten men. No, they won't let me in the place. Denver has been trying to do me. He thought I tipped him off for the other raid. I didn't, though. You want to hurry. I've got to get back home. The house is only three blocks from here."

Before ten minutes had sped the captain with a dozen men stole with their guide into the hallway of a dark and virtuous-looking building in which many businesses were conducted by day.

"Third floor, rear," said the Kid, softly. "I'll lead the way."

Two axemen faced the door that he pointed out to them.

"It seems all quiet," said the captain, doubtfully. "Are you sure your tip is straight?"

"Cut away!" said the Kid. "It's on me if it ain't."

The axes crashed through the as yet unprotected door. A blaze of light from within poured through the smashed panels. The door fell, and the raiders sprang into the room with their guns handy.

The big room was furnished with the gaudy magnificence dear to Denver Dick's western ideas. Various well-patronized games were in progress. About fifty men who were in the room rushed upon the police in a grand break for personal liberty. The plain-clothes men had to do a little club-swinging. More than half the patrons escaped.

Denver Dick had graced his game with his own presence that night. He led the rush that was intended to sweep away the smaller body of raiders, But when he saw the Kid his manner became personal. Being in the heavyweight class he cast himself joyfully upon his slighter

enemy, and they rolled down a flight of stairs in each other's arms. On the landing they separated and arose, and then the Kid was able to use some of his professional tactics, which had been useless to him while in the excited clutch of a 200-pound sporting gentleman who was about to lose \$20,000 worth of paraphernalia.

After vanquishing his adversary the Kid hurried upstairs and through the gambling-room into a smaller apartment connecting by an arched doorway.

Here was a long table set with choicest chinaware and silver, and lavishly furnished with food of that expensive and spectacular sort of which the devotees of sport are supposed to be fond. Here again was to be perceived the liberal and florid taste of the gentleman with the urban cognomenal prefix.

A No. 10 patent leather shoe protruded a few of its inches outside the tablecloth along the floor. The Kid seized this and plucked forth a black man in a white tie and the garb of a servitor.

"Get up!" commanded the Kid. "Are you in charge of this free lunch?"

"Yes, sah, I was. Has they done pinched us ag'in, boss?"

"Looks that way. Listen to me. Are there any peaches in this layout? If there ain't I'll have to throw up the sponge."

"There was three dozen, sah, when the game opened this evenin'; but I reckon the gentlemen done eat 'em all up. If you'd like to eat a fust-rate orange, sah, I kin find you some."

"Get busy," ordered the Kid, sternly, "and move whatever peach crop you've got quick or there'll be trouble. If anybody oranges me again to-night, I'll knock his face off."

The raid on Denver Dick's high-priced and prodigal luncheon revealed one lone, last peach that had escaped the epicurean jaws of the followers of chance. Into the Kid's pocket it went, and that indefatigable forager departed immediately with his prize. With scarcely a glance at the scene on the sidewalk below, where the officers were loading their prisoners into the patrol wagons, he moved homeward with long, swift strides.

His heart was light as he went. So rode the knights back to Camelot after perils and high deeds done for their ladies fair. The Kid's lady had commanded him and he had obeyed. True, it was but a peach that she had craved; but it had been no small deed to glean a peach at midnight from that wintry city where yet the February snows lay like iron. She had asked for a peach; she was his bride; in his

pocket the peach was warming in his hand that held it for fear that it might fall out and be lost.

On the way the Kid turned in at an all-night drug store and said to the spectacled clerk:

"Say, sport, I wish you'd size up this rib of mine and see if it's broke. I was in a little scrap and bumped down a flight or two of stairs."

The druggist made an examination. "It isn't broken," was his diagnosis, "but you have a bruise there that looks like you'd fallen off the Flatiron twice."

"That's all right," said the Kid. "Let's have your clothesbrush, please."

The bride waited in the rosy glow of the pink lamp shade. The miracles were not all passed away. By breathing a desire for some slight thing--a flower, a pomegranate, a--oh, yes, a peach--she could send forth her man into the night, into the world which could not withstand him, and he would do her bidding.

And now he stood by her chair and laid the peach in her hand.

"Naughty boy!" she said, fondly. "Did I say a peach? I think I would much rather have had an orange."

Blest be the bride.

THE MORTAL IMMORTAL

Project Gutenberg's *Tales and Stories*, by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

JULY 16, 1833.—This is a memorable anniversary for me; on it I complete my three hundred and twenty-third year!

The Wandering Jew?—certainly not. More than eighteen centuries have passed over his head. In comparison with him, I am a very young Immortal.

Am I, then, immortal? This is a question which I have asked myself, by day and night, for now three hundred and three years, and yet cannot answer it. I detected a grey hair amidst my brown locks this very day—that surely signifies decay. Yet it may have remained concealed there for three hundred years—for some persons have become entirely white-headed before twenty years of age.

I will tell my story, and my reader shall judge for me. I will tell my story, and so contrive to pass some few hours of a long eternity, become so wearisome to me. For ever! Can it be? to live for ever! I have heard of enchantments, in which the victims were plunged into a deep sleep, to wake, after a hundred years, as fresh as ever: I have heard of the Seven Sleepers—thus to be immortal would not be so burthensome: but, oh! the weight of never-ending time—the tedious passage of the still-succeeding hours! How happy was the fabled Nourjahad!—But to my task.

All the world has heard of Cornelius Agrippa. His memory is as immortal as his arts have made me. All the world has also heard of his scholar, who, unawares, raised the foul fiend during his master's absence, and was destroyed by him. The report, true or false, of this accident, was attended with many inconveniences to the renowned philosopher. All his scholars at once deserted him—his servants disappeared. He had no one near him to put coals on his ever-burning fires while he slept, or to attend to the changeful colours of his medicines while he studied. Experiment after experiment failed, because one pair of hands was insufficient to complete them: the dark spirits laughed at him for not being able to retain a single mortal in his service.

I was then very young—very poor—and very much in love. I had been for about a year the pupil of Cornelius, though I was absent when this accident took place. On my return, my friends implored me not to return to the alchymist's abode. I trembled as I listened to the dire tale they told; I required no second warning; and when Cornelius came and offered me a purse of gold if I would remain under his roof, I felt as if Satan himself tempted me. My teeth chattered—my hair stood on end;—I ran off as fast as my trembling knees would permit.

My failing steps were directed whither for two years they had every evening been attracted,—a gently bubbling spring of pure living water, beside which lingered a dark-haired girl, whose beaming eyes were fixed on the path I was accustomed each night to tread. I cannot remember the hour when I did not love Bertha; we had been neighbours and playmates from infancy,—her parents, like mine, were of humble life, yet respectable,—our attachment had been a source of pleasure to them. In an evil hour, a malignant fever carried off both her father and mother, and Bertha became an orphan. She would have found a home beneath my paternal roof, but, unfortunately, the old lady of the near castle, rich, childless, and solitary, declared her intention to adopt her. Henceforth Bertha was clad in silk—inhabited a marble palace—and was looked on as being highly favoured by fortune. But in her new situation among her new associates, Bertha remained true to the friend of her humbler days; she often visited the cottage of my father, and when forbidden to go thither, she would stray towards the neighbouring wood, and meet me beside its shady fountain.

She often declared that she owed no duty to her new protectress equal in sanctity to that which bound us. Yet still I was too poor to marry, and she grew weary of being tormented on my account. She had a haughty but an impatient spirit, and grew angry at the obstacles that prevented our union. We met now after an absence, and she had been sorely beset while I was away; she complained bitterly, and almost reproached me for being poor. I replied hastily,—

“I am honest, if I am poor!—were I not, I might soon become rich!”

This exclamation produced a thousand questions. I feared to shock her by owning the truth, but she drew it from me; and then, casting a look of disdain on me, she said,—

“You pretend to love, and you fear to face the Devil for my sake!”

I protested that I had only dreaded to offend her;—while she dwelt on the magnitude of the reward that I should receive. Thus encouraged—shamed by her—led on by love and hope, laughing at my late fears, with quick steps and a light heart, I returned to accept the offers of the alchemist, and was instantly installed in my office.

A year passed away. I became possessed of no insignificant sum of money. Custom had banished my fears. In spite of the most painful vigilance, I had never detected the trace of a cloven foot; nor was the studious silence of our abode ever disturbed by demoniac howls. I still continued my stolen interviews with Bertha, and Hope dawned on me—Hope—but not perfect joy; for Bertha fancied that love and security were enemies, and her pleasure was to divide them in my bosom. Though true of heart, she was somewhat of a coquette in manner; and I was jealous as a Turk. She slighted me in a thousand ways, yet would never acknowledge herself to be in the wrong. She would drive me mad with anger, and then force me to beg her pardon. Sometimes she fancied that I was not sufficiently submissive, and then she had some story of a rival, favoured by her protectress. She was surrounded by silk-clad youths—the rich and gay. What chance had the sad-robed scholar of Cornelius compared with these?

On one occasion, the philosopher made such large demands upon my time, that I was unable to meet her as I was wont. He was engaged in some mighty work, and I was forced to remain, day and night, feeding his furnaces and watching his chemical preparations. Bertha waited for me in vain at the fountain. Her haughty spirit fired at this neglect; and when at last I stole out during the few short minutes allotted to me for slumber, and hoped to be consoled by her, she received me with disdain, dismissed me in scorn, and vowed that any man should possess her hand rather than he who could not be in two places at once for her sake. She would be revenged! And truly she was. In my dingy retreat I heard that she had been hunting, attended by Albert Hoffer. Albert Hoffer was favoured by her protectress; and the three passed in cavalcade before my

smoky window. Methought that they mentioned my name; it was followed by a laugh of derision, as her dark eyes glanced contemptuously towards my abode.

Jealousy, with all its venom and all its misery, entered my breast. Now I shed a torrent of tears, to think that I should never call her mine; and, anon, I imprecated a thousand curses on her inconstancy. Yet, still I must stir the fires of the alchemist, still attend on the changes of his unintelligible medicines.

Cornelius had watched for three days and nights, nor closed his eyes. The progress of his alembics was slower than he expected: in spite of his anxiety, sleep weighed upon his eyelids. Again and again he threw off drowsiness with more than human energy; again and again it stole away his senses. He eyed his crucibles wistfully. "Not ready yet," he murmured; "will another night pass before the work is accomplished? Winzy, you are vigilant—you are faithful—you have slept, my boy—you slept last night. Look at that glass vessel. The liquid it contains is of a soft rose-colour: the moment it begins to change its hue, awaken me—till then I may close my eyes. First, it will turn white, and then emit golden flashes; but wait not till then; when the rose-colour fades, rouse me." I scarcely heard the last words, muttered, as they were, in sleep. Even then he did not quite yield to nature. "Winzy, my boy," he again said, "do not touch the vessel—do not put it to your lips; it is a philter—a philter to cure love; you would not cease to love your Bertha—beware to drink!"

And he slept. His venerable head sunk on his breast, and I scarce heard his regular breathing. For a few minutes I watched the vessel—the rosy hue of the liquid remained unchanged. Then my thoughts wandered—they visited the fountain, and dwelt on a thousand charming scenes never to be renewed—never! Serpents and adders were in my heart as the word "Never!" half formed itself on my lips. False girl!—false and cruel! Never more would she smile on me as that evening she smiled on Albert. Worthless, detested woman! I would not remain unrevenged—she should see Albert expire at her feet—she should die beneath my vengeance. She had smiled in disdain and triumph—she knew my wretchedness and her power. Yet what power had she?—the power of exciting my hate—my utter scorn—my—oh, all but indifference! Could I attain that—could I regard her with careless eyes, transferring my rejected love to one fairer and more true, that were indeed a victory!

A bright flash darted before my eyes. I had forgotten the medicine of the adept; I gazed on it with wonder: flashes of admirable beauty, more bright than those which the diamond emits when the sun's rays are on it, glanced from the surface of the liquid; an odour the most fragrant and grateful stole over my sense; the vessel seemed one globe of living radiance, lovely to the eye, and most inviting to the taste. The first thought, instinctively inspired by the grosser sense, was, I will—I must

drink. I raised the vessel to my lips. "It will cure me of love—of torture!" Already I had quaffed half of the most delicious liquor ever tasted by the palate of man, when the philosopher stirred. I started—I dropped the glass—the fluid flamed and glanced along the floor, while I felt Cornelius's gripe at my throat, as he shrieked aloud, "Wretch! you have destroyed the labour of my life!"

The philosopher was totally unaware that I had drunk any portion of his drug. His idea was, and I gave a tacit assent to it, that I had raised the vessel from curiosity, and that, frightened at its brightness, and the flashes of intense light it gave forth, I had let it fall. I never undeceived him. The fire of the medicine was quenched—the fragrance died away—he grew calm, as a philosopher should under the heaviest trials, and dismissed me to rest.

I will not attempt to describe the sleep of glory and bliss which bathed my soul in paradise during the remaining hours of that memorable night. Words would be faint and shallow types of my enjoyment, or of the gladness that possessed my bosom when I woke. I trod air—my thoughts were in heaven. Earth appeared heaven, and my inheritance upon it was to be one trance of delight. "This it is to be cured of love," I thought; "I will see Bertha this day, and she will find her lover cold and regardless; too happy to be disdainful, yet how utterly indifferent to her!"

The hours danced away. The philosopher, secure that he had once succeeded, and believing that he might again, began to concoct the same medicine once more. He was shut up with his books and drugs, and I had a holiday. I dressed myself with care; I looked in an old but polished shield, which served me for a mirror; methought my good looks had wonderfully improved. I hurried beyond the precincts of the town, joy in my soul, the beauty of heaven and earth around me. I turned my steps towards the castle—I could look on its lofty turrets with lightness of heart, for I was cured of love. My Bertha saw me afar off, as I came up the avenue. I know not what sudden impulse animated her bosom, but at the sight, she sprung with a light fawn-like bound down the marble steps, and was hastening towards me. But I had been perceived by another person. The old high-born hag, who called herself her protectress, and was her tyrant, had seen me also; she hobbled, panting, up the terrace; a page, as ugly as herself, held up her train, and fanned her as she hurried along, and stopped my fair girl with a "How, now, my bold mistress? whither so fast? Back to your cage—hawks are abroad!"

Bertha clasped her hands—her eyes were still bent on my approaching figure. I saw the contest. How I abhorred the old crone who checked the kind impulses of my Bertha's softening heart. Hitherto, respect for her rank had caused me to avoid the lady of the castle; now I disdained such trivial considerations. I was cured of love, and lifted above all human fears; I hastened forwards, and soon reached the

terrace. How lovely Bertha looked! her eyes flashing fire, her cheeks glowing with impatience and anger, she was a thousand times more graceful and charming than ever. I no longer loved—Oh no! I adored—worshipped—idolized her!

She had that morning been persecuted, with more than usual vehemence, to consent to an immediate marriage with my rival. She was reproached with the encouragement that she had shown him—she was threatened with being turned out of doors with disgrace and shame. Her proud spirit rose in arms at the threat; but when she remembered the scorn that she had heaped upon me, and how, perhaps, she had thus lost one whom she now regarded as her only friend, she wept with remorse and rage. At that moment I appeared. “Oh, Winzy!” she exclaimed, “take me to your mother’s cot; swiftly let me leave the detested luxuries and wretchedness of this noble dwelling—take me to poverty and happiness.”

I clasped her in my arms with transport. The old dame was speechless with fury, and broke forth into invective only when we were far on our road to my natal cottage. My mother received the fair fugitive, escaped from a gilt cage to nature and liberty, with tenderness and joy; my father, who loved her, welcomed her heartily; it was a day of rejoicing, which did not need the addition of the celestial potion of the alchymist to steep me in delight.

Soon after this eventful day, I became the husband of Bertha. I ceased to be the scholar of Cornelius, but I continued his friend. I always felt grateful to him for having, unawares, procured me that delicious draught of a divine elixir, which, instead of curing me of love (sad cure! solitary and joyless remedy for evils which seem blessings to the memory), had inspired me with courage and resolution, thus winning for me an inestimable treasure in my Bertha.

I often called to mind that period of trance-like inebriation with wonder. The drink of Cornelius had not fulfilled the task for which he affirmed that it had been prepared, but its effects were more potent and blissful than words can express. They had faded by degrees, yet they lingered long—and painted life in hues of splendour. Bertha often wondered at my lightness of heart and unaccustomed gaiety; for, before, I had been rather serious, or even sad, in my disposition. She loved me the better for my cheerful temper, and our days were winged by joy.

Five years afterwards I was suddenly summoned to the bedside of the dying Cornelius. He had sent for me in haste, conjuring my instant presence. I found him stretched on his pallet, enfeebled even to death; all of life that yet remained animated his piercing eyes, and they were fixed on a glass vessel, full of a roseate liquid.

“Behold,” he said, in a broken and inward voice, “the vanity of human wishes! a second time my hopes are about to be crowned, a second time

they are destroyed. Look at that liquor—you remember five years ago I had prepared the same, with the same success;—then, as now, my thirsting lips expected to taste the immortal elixir—you dashed it from me! and at present it is too late.”

He spoke with difficulty, and fell back on his pillow. I could not help saying,—

“How, revered master, can a cure for love restore you to life?”

A faint smile gleamed across his face as I listened earnestly to his scarcely intelligible answer.

“A cure for love and for all things—the Elixir of Immortality. Ah! if now I might drink, I should live for ever!”

As he spoke, a golden flash gleamed from the fluid; a well-remembered fragrance stole over the air; he raised himself, all weak as he was—strength seemed miraculously to re-enter his frame—he stretched forth his hand—a loud explosion startled me—a ray of fire shot up from the elixir, and the glass vessel which contained it was shivered to atoms! I turned my eyes towards the philosopher; he had fallen back—his eyes were glassy—his features rigid—he was dead!

But I lived, and was to live for ever! So said the unfortunate alchymist, and for a few days I believed his words. I remembered the glorious intoxication that had followed my stolen draught. I reflected on the change I had felt in my frame—in my soul. The bounding elasticity of the one—the buoyant lightness of the other. I surveyed myself in a mirror, and could perceive no change in my features during the space of the five years which had elapsed. I remembered the radiant hues and grateful scent of that delicious beverage—worthy the gift it was capable of bestowing—I was, then, IMMORTAL!

A few days after I laughed at my credulity. The old proverb, that “a prophet is least regarded in his own country,” was true with respect to me and my defunct master. I loved him as a man—I respected him as a sage—but I derided the notion that he could command the powers of darkness, and laughed at the superstitious fears with which he was regarded by the vulgar. He was a wise philosopher, but had no acquaintance with any spirits but those clad in flesh and blood. His science was simply human; and human science, I soon persuaded myself, could never conquer nature’s laws so far as to imprison the soul for ever within its carnal habitation. Cornelius had brewed a soul-refreshing drink—more inebriating than wine—sweeter and more fragrant than any fruit: it possessed probably strong medicinal powers, imparting gladness to the heart and vigour to the limbs; but its effects would wear out; already were they diminished in my frame. I was a lucky fellow to have quaffed health and joyous spirits, and perhaps long life,

at my master's hands; but my good fortune ended there: longevity was far different from immortality.

I continued to entertain this belief for many years. Sometimes a thought stole across me—Was the alchemist indeed deceived? But my habitual credence was, that I should meet the fate of all the children of Adam at my appointed time—a little late, but still at a natural age. Yet it was certain that I retained a wonderfully youthful look. I was laughed at for my vanity in consulting the mirror so often, but I consulted it in vain—my brow was untrenched—my cheeks—my eyes—my whole person continued as untarnished as in my twentieth year.

I was troubled. I looked at the faded beauty of Bertha—I seemed more like her son. By degrees our neighbours began to make similar observations, and I found at last that I went by the name of the Scholar bewitched. Bertha herself grew uneasy. She became jealous and peevish, and at length she began to question me. We had no children; we were all in all to each other; and though, as she grew older, her vivacious spirit became a little allied to ill-temper, and her beauty sadly diminished, I cherished her in my heart as the mistress I had idolized, the wife I had sought and won with such perfect love.

At last our situation became intolerable: Bertha was fifty—I twenty years of age. I had, in very shame, in some measure adopted the habits of a more advanced age; I no longer mingled in the dance among the young and gay, but my heart bounded along with them while I restrained my feet; and a sorry figure I cut among the Nestors of our village. But before the time I mention, things were altered—we were universally shunned; we were—at least, I was—reported to have kept up an iniquitous acquaintance with some of my former master's supposed friends. Poor Bertha was pitied, but deserted. I was regarded with horror and detestation.

What was to be done? we sat by our winter fire—poverty had made itself felt, for none would buy the produce of my farm; and often I had been forced to journey twenty miles, to some place where I was not known, to dispose of our property. It is true, we had saved something for an evil day—that day was come.

We sat by our lone fireside—the old-hearted youth and his antiquated wife. Again Bertha insisted on knowing the truth; she recapitulated all she had ever heard said about me, and added her own observations. She conjured me to cast off the spell; she described how much more comely grey hairs were than my chestnut locks; she descanted on the reverence and respect due to age—how preferable to the slight regard paid to mere children: could I imagine that the despicable gifts of youth and good looks outweighed disgrace, hatred, and scorn? Nay, in the end I should be burnt as a dealer in the black art, while she, to whom I had not deigned to communicate any portion of my good fortune, might be stoned

as my accomplice. At length she insinuated that I must share my secret with her, and bestow on her like benefits to those I myself enjoyed, or she would denounce me—and then she burst into tears.

Thus beset, methought it was the best way to tell the truth. I revealed it as tenderly as I could, and spoke only of a very long life, not of immortality—which representation, indeed, coincided best with my own ideas. When I ended, I rose and said,—

“And now, my Bertha, will you denounce the lover of your youth?—You will not, I know. But it is too hard, my poor wife, that you should suffer from my ill-luck and the accursed arts of Cornelius. I will leave you—you have wealth enough, and friends will return in my absence. I will go; young as I seem, and strong as I am, I can work and gain my bread among strangers, unsuspected and unknown. I loved you in youth; God is my witness that I would not desert you in age, but that your safety and happiness require it.”

I took my cap and moved towards the door; in a moment Bertha’s arms were round my neck, and her lips were pressed to mine. “No, my husband, my Winzy,” she said, “you shall not go alone—take me with you; we will remove from this place, and, as you say, among strangers we shall be unsuspected and safe. I am not so very old as quite to shame you, my Winzy; and I daresay the charm will soon wear off, and, with the blessing of God, you will become more elderly-looking, as is fitting; you shall not leave me.”

I returned the good soul’s embrace heartily. “I will not, my Bertha; but for your sake I had not thought of such a thing. I will be your true, faithful husband while you are spared to me, and do my duty by you to the last.”

The next day we prepared secretly for our emigration. We were obliged to make great pecuniary sacrifices—it could not be helped. We realized a sum sufficient, at least, to maintain us while Bertha lived; and, without saying adieu to any one, quitted our native country to take refuge in a remote part of western France.

It was a cruel thing to transport poor Bertha from her native village, and the friends of her youth, to a new country, new language, new customs. The strange secret of my destiny rendered this removal immaterial to me; but I compassionated her deeply, and was glad to perceive that she found compensation for her misfortunes in a variety of little ridiculous circumstances. Away from all tell-tale chroniclers, she sought to decrease the apparent disparity of our ages by a thousand feminine arts—rouge, youthful dress, and assumed juvenility of manner. I could not be angry. Did not I myself wear a mask? Why quarrel with hers, because it was less successful? I grieved deeply when I remembered that this was my Bertha, whom I had loved so fondly, and won with such

transport—the dark-eyed, dark-haired girl, with smiles of enchanting archness and a step like a fawn—this mincing, simpering, jealous old woman. I should have revered her grey locks and withered cheeks; but thus!—It was my work, I knew; but I did not the less deplore this type of human weakness.

Her jealousy never slept. Her chief occupation was to discover that, in spite of outward appearances, I was myself growing old. I verily believe that the poor soul loved me truly in her heart, but never had woman so tormenting a mode of displaying fondness. She would discern wrinkles in my face and decrepitude in my walk, while I bounded along in youthful vigour, the youngest looking of twenty youths. I never dared address another woman. On one occasion, fancying that the belle of the village regarded me with favouring eyes, she brought me a grey wig. Her constant discourse among her acquaintances was, that though I looked so young, there was ruin at work within my frame; and she affirmed that the worst symptom about me was my apparent health. My youth was a disease, she said, and I ought at all times to prepare, if not for a sudden and awful death, at least to awake some morning white-headed and bowed down with all the marks of advanced years. I let her talk—I often joined in her conjectures. Her warnings chimed in with my never-ceasing speculations concerning my state, and I took an earnest, though painful, interest in listening to all that her quick wit and excited imagination could say on the subject.

Why dwell on these minute circumstances? We lived on for many long years. Bertha became bedrid and paralytic; I nursed her as a mother might a child. She grew peevish, and still harped upon one string—of how long I should survive her. It has ever been a source of consolation to me, that I performed my duty scrupulously towards her. She had been mine in youth, she was mine in age; and at last, when I heaped the sod over her corpse, I wept to feel that I had lost all that really bound me to humanity.

Since then how many have been my cares and woes, how few and empty my enjoyments! I pause here in my history—I will pursue it no further. A sailor without rudder or compass, tossed on a stormy sea—a traveller lost on a widespread heath, without landmark or stone to guide him—such have I been: more lost, more hopeless than either. A nearing ship, a gleam from some far cot, may save them; but I have no beacon except the hope of death.

Death! mysterious, ill-visaged friend of weak humanity! Why alone of all mortals have you cast me from your sheltering fold? Oh, for the peace of the grave! the deep silence of the iron-bound tomb! that thought would cease to work in my brain, and my heart beat no more with emotions varied only by new forms of sadness!

Am I immortal? I return to my first question. In the first place, is it

not more probable that the beverage of the alchymist was fraught rather with longevity than eternal life? Such is my hope. And then be it remembered, that I only drank half of the potion prepared by him. Was not the whole necessary to complete the charm? To have drained half the Elixir of Immortality is but to be half-immortal—my For-ever is thus truncated and null.

But again, who shall number the years of the half of eternity? I often try to imagine by what rule the infinite may be divided. Sometimes I fancy age advancing upon me. One grey hair I have found. Fool! do I lament? Yes, the fear of age and death often creeps coldly into my heart; and the more I live, the more I dread death, even while I abhor life. Such an enigma is man—born to perish—when he wars, as I do, against the established laws of his nature.

But for this anomaly of feeling surely I might die: the medicine of the alchymist would not be proof against fire—sword—and the strangling waters. I have gazed upon the blue depths of many a placid lake, and the tumultuous rushing of many a mighty river, and have said, peace inhabits those waters; yet I have turned my steps away, to live yet another day. I have asked myself, whether suicide would be a crime in one to whom thus only the portals of the other world could be opened. I have done all, except presenting myself as a soldier or duellist, an object of destruction to my—no, not my fellow-mortals, and therefore I have shrunk away. They are not my fellows. The inextinguishable power of life in my frame, and their ephemeral existence, places us wide as the poles asunder. I could not raise a hand against the meanest or the most powerful among them.

Thus I have lived on for many a year—alone, and weary of myself—desirous of death, yet never dying—a mortal immortal. Neither ambition nor avarice can enter my mind, and the ardent love that gnaws at my heart, never to be returned—never to find an equal on which to expend itself—lives there only to torment me.

This very day I conceived a design by which I may end all—without self-slaughter, without making another man a Cain—an expedition, which mortal frame can never survive, even endued with the youth and strength that inhabits mine. Thus I shall put my immortality to the test, and rest for ever—or return, the wonder and benefactor of the human species.

Before I go, a miserable vanity has caused me to pen these pages. I would not die, and leave no name behind. Three centuries have passed since I quaffed the fatal beverage; another year shall not elapse before, encountering gigantic dangers—warring with the powers of frost in their home—beset by famine, toil, and tempest—I yield this body, too tenacious a cage for a soul which thirsts for freedom, to the destructive elements of air and water; or, if I survive, my name shall be recorded as one of the most famous among the sons of men; and, my

task achieved, I shall adopt more resolute means, and, by scattering and annihilating the atoms that compose my frame, set at liberty the life imprisoned within, and so cruelly prevented from soaring from this dim earth to a sphere more congenial to its immortal essence.

THE WAG-LADY

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Crimson Gardenia and Other Tales of Adventure*, by Rex Beach

Her real name was June--well, the rest doesn't matter; for no one ever got beyond that point. It was the Scrap Iron Kid who first bore news of her coming to the Wag-boys. Knowing him for a poet, they put down his perfervid description as the logical outpouring of a romantic spirit.

Reddy summed it up neatly by saying, "The Kid has fell for another quilt, that's all."

"I 'ain't fell for no frill," the Kid stoutly declared. "I've saw too many to lose me out. This gal's a thoroughbred."

"Another recruit for Simons, I suppose," Llewellyn yawned. "I'll drop in at the theater and look her over."

"An' she ain't no actor, neither," Scrap Iron declared. "She's goin' to start a hotel."

"Bah! If she's as good-looking as you claim, some Swede will marry her before she can buy her dishes."

"Sure! They must all pull something like that to start with," said the Dummy, who was a woman-hater; "then when you've played 'em straight they h'ist the pirate's flag and go to palmin' percentage checks in some dance-hall."

But again the idealistic Scrap Iron Kid came stubbornly to the defense of the new-comer; and the argument was growing warm when Thomasville and the Swede entered with two caddies of tobacco which they had managed to acquire during the confusion at the water-front, thus ending the discussion.

There were six of the Wag-boys, six as bold and unscrupulous gentlemen as the ebb and swirl of the Northern gold rush had left stranded beneath the rim of the Arctic, and they had joined forces, drawn as much, perhaps, by their common calling as by the facilities thus afforded for

perfecting any alibis that a long and lonesome winter might render necessary. Nor is it quite correct to state that they were stranded; for it takes more than the buffets of a stormy fate to strand such men as the Dummy and George Llewellyn and the Scrap Iron Kid and their three companions.

Llewellyn was the gentleman of the outfit, owing to the fact that the polish of an early training had not been utterly dulled by a four years' trick at Deer Lodge Penitentiary. The Dummy had gained his name from an admirable self-restraint which no "third-degree" methods had ever served to break; Thomasville was so called because of a boyish pride in his Georgia birthplace; while Reddy and the Swede--But this is the story of the Wag-lady, and we digress.

To begin with, June was young, with a springtime flush in her cheeks, and eyes as clear as glacier pools. Yet with all her youth and beauty, she possessed a poise that held men at a distance. She also had a certain fearlessness that came, perhaps, from worldly innocence and was far more effective than the customary brazenness of frontier women. She went ahead with her business, asking neither advice nor assistance, and, almost before the Wag-boys knew what she was up to, she had leased the P. C. Warehouse near their cabin and had carpenters changing it into a bunk-house.

In a week it was open for business; on the second night after it was full. Then she built a tiny cabin near her "hotel," and proceeded to keep house for herself, sleeping daytimes and working nights.

"Say, she's coinin' money!" the Scrap Iron Kid advised his companions some time later. "She's got fifty bunks at a dollar apiece, and each one is full of Swede. You'd ought 'o drift by in business hours--it sounds like a sawmill."

"If she's getting the money so fast, why don't you grab her, Kid?" inquired Llewellyn.

"You cut that out!" snapped the former speaker. "There ain't nobody going to grab that dame. I'd croak any guy that made a crack at her, and that goes!"

Seeing a familiar light smoldering in the Kid's eyes, Llewellyn desisted from further comment, but he made up his mind to become acquainted with June at once.

Now, while he succeeded, it was in quite an unexpected manner; for before he had formulated any plan Thomasville came to him with a proposition that drove all thoughts of women from his mind and sent them both out to the mines shortly after dark, each provided with a six-shooter and a bandana handkerchief with eyeholes cut in it.

Jane had returned to her cabin the following morning, and was preparing for bed, when she heard a faltering footstep outside. She glanced down at her money-sack filled with the night's receipts of her hotel, then at the fastenings of her door. She knew that law was but a pretense and order a mockery in the camp, but the next instant she slid back the bolt and let in a flood of morning sunlight.

There, leaning against her wall, was a tall, dark young man whose head was hanging loosely and rolling from side to side. His hair beneath the gray Stetson was wet, his boots were sodden and muddy, one arm was thrust limply into the front of his coat as if paralyzed. She saw that the sleeve was caked with blood. Even as she spoke he sagged forward and slid down at her feet.

She was not the sort to run for help, and so, taking him under the armpits, she had him on her bed and his sleeve cut away before he opened his eyes. It was but an instant's work to heat a basin of water; then she fell to bathing the wound. When she drew forth the shreds of cloth that had been taken into the flesh by the bullet, the man's face grew ghastly and she heard his teeth grind, but he made no other sound.

"That hurt, didn't it?" she smiled at him, and he tried to smile back.
"How did it happen?" she queried.

"Accident."

"You have come a long way?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you ask for help?"

"It--wasn't worth while."

She looked at him wonderingly, admiring his gameness; then was surprised to hear him say:

"So you're June!"

"Yes."

He closed his eyes and lay still while she poured some brandy for him; then he said:

"Please don't bother. I must be going."

"Not till you've eaten something." She laid a soft, cool palm upon his forehead when he endeavored to rise, and he dropped back again, watching

her curiously.

He had barely finished eating when another footstep sounded outside and a heavy knock followed.

"Hey, June!" called a voice. "Are you up?"

It was Jim Devlin, the marshal, and the girl rose, only to stop at the look she saw in the wounded man's face. His dark eyes had widened; desperation haunted them.

"What is it, Mr. Devlin?" she answered.

"Have you seen anything of a wounded man within the last half-hour?"

She flashed another glance at her guest, to find him staring at her defiantly, but there was no appeal in his face. "What in the world do you mean?"

"There was a hold-up at Anvil Creek, and some shooting. We're pretty sure one of the gang was hit, but he got away. Pete, the waterman, says he saw a sick-looking fellow crossing the tundra in this direction. I thought you might have noticed him."

Again June's eyes flew back to the pale face of the stranger. He had risen now and, seeing the frank inquiry in her gaze, he shrugged his shoulders and turned his good hand palm upward as if in surrender, whereupon she answered the marshal:

"I'm sorry you can't come in, Mr. Devlin; but I'm just going to bed."

"Oh, that's all right. I'll take a look through your bunk-house. Sorry to disturb you."

When the footsteps had died away the stranger moistened his lips and asked, "Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. You are brave, and brave men aren't bad. Besides, I couldn't bear to send any person out of God's sunshine into the dark. You see, I don't believe in prisons."

When Llewellyn told the other Wag-boys of June's part in his escape his story was met with exclamations that would have pleased her to hear, but the Scrap Iron Kid broke in to say, menacingly:

"Look here, George, don't aim to take no advantage of what she done for you when you was hurt, or I'll tip her off!"

"Aw, rats!" cried Llewellyn, furiously. "What do you take me for?" Then,

staring coldly at the Kid, he said, "And it won't do her any good to have you hanging around, either."

June's action toward Llewellyn, and her mode of life, gained the admiration and respect of the Wag-boys, and although they avoided her carefully, they watched over her from a distance. Nor was it long before they found a means of serving her, although she did not hear of it for many months.

The Dummy came home one night to inform his partners that Sammy Sternberg, who owned the Miners' Rest, was boasting of his conquest of June, whereupon Sammy was notified by Llewellyn, acting as a committee of one, that his lies must cease. Sammy got a little drunk a few nights later and boasted again, with the result that the Scrap Iron Kid, who was playing black-jack, promptly floored him with a clout of his .45, and the Swede who was standing near by kicked the prostrate Sternberg in the most conspicuous part of his green-and-purple waistcoat, thereby loosening a rib.

It was not long before the sporting element of the camp learned to treat June with the highest courtesy, and, since she had been adopted in a measure by the Wag-boys, she became known as the Wag-lady.

Meanwhile June was prospering. The homeless men who patronized her place began to intrust their gold-sacks to her care; so she went to Harry Hope, the P. C. agent, and bought a safe in which to deposit her lodgers' valuables. Frequently thereafter she sat guard all night over considerable sums of money while the owners snored peacefully in the big back room.

When winter closed down June began to see more and more of Harry Hope. And she began to like him, too; for he was the sort to win women's hearts, being big and boyish and full of merriment. He had spent several years in the Northland, and its winds had blown from him many of the city-born traits, leaving him unaffected, impulsive, and hearty. While the frontier takes away some evil qualities it also takes some good ones, and Harry Hope was not by any means a saint. As the nights grew longer he gained the habit of dropping in to talk with June on his way up-town. One evening he paused before leaving and asked:

"Can you take care of something for me, June?"

"Of course," she answered.

He flung a leather wallet into her lap, laughing. "You're the banker for the community; so lock that up overnight, if you please."

"Oh-h!" she gasped. "There are thousands of dollars! I'd rather not."

"Come! you must! I didn't get it in time to put it in the company's safe, and if I carry it around somebody will frisk me."

"Where are you going?"

"Down to Sternberg's. I'm going to outguess his faro-dealer. This is my lucky night, you know."

Realizing full well the lawlessness of the camp, June felt a bit nervous as she laid the money away. In the course of the evening, however, she gradually lost her fears.

Some time after midnight, when the big front room of the bunk-house was empty, the outside door opened, admitting a billow of frost out of which emerged two men. They were strangers to June, and when she asked them if they wished beds they said "No." They backed up to the stove and began staring at their surroundings curiously.

It had never been June's practice to forbid any man the comfort of her coal-burner, even though he lacked the price for a bed, but, remembering the money in her safe, she sharply ordered these two out.

Neither man stirred. They blinked at her in a manner that sent little spasms of nervousness up her spine.

"I tell you it's too late--you can't stay!"

"That's too bad," said one of them. He crossed toward the desk behind which she sat, at which she softly closed the heavy safe door. It gave out a metallic click, however, which caused the fellow's eyes to gleam.

"That safe ain't locked, eh?" he inquired.

"Yes, it is," she lied.

He smiled as if to put her at her ease, but it was an evil leer and set her heart to pounding violently. She was tempted to cry out and arouse her lodgers, but merely flung back the fellow's glance defiantly.

The stranger ran his eye over the place and then said, "I guess we'll set awhile." Drawing a chair up beside the door, he motioned to his partner to do the same. They tilted back at their ease, and June fancied they were listening intently. For a half-hour, an hour, they sat there, following her every movement, now and then exchanging a word in a tone too low for her to hear.

She was well-nigh hysterical with the strain of waiting, when she saw both men lower the front legs of their chairs and rise together. The next instant the door swung violently yet noiselessly inward and a

masked man with a gun in his hand leaped out of the night. Another man was at his heels, and they covered her simultaneously. Then a most amazing thing occurred.

June's mysterious visitors pounced upon them from behind, there was a brief, breathless struggle, and the next instant all four swept out into the snow amid a tangle of arms and legs. Followed the sounds of a furious scuffle, of heavy blows, curses and groans, then a voice:

"Beat it now or we'll croak the two of you! And peddle the word that no rough stuff goes here. Do you get that?" There was the impact of a boot planted against flesh, and the next instant June's deliverers had re-entered and closed the door.

One of them was sucking a wound in the fleshy part of his hand where a falling revolver hammer had punched him, but he inquired in a thoroughly business-like tone, "Got a little hot water, June?"

June emerged weakly from behind her desk. "W-what does it all--mean?"

"Oh, it's all right. They won't trouble you no more."

"They came to--rob me, and you knew it--"

"Sure! Harry Hope got full and told about leaving eight thousand dollars with you; so we beat 'em to it."

"But why didn't you say so? You frightened me."

"We wasn't sure they'd try it, and we didn't like to work you up."

"Please--who are you?"

"Us? Why, we're Wag-boys! Llewellyn's our pal. I'm Charley Fitzhugh; they call me the Dummy. And this is Thomasville."

Thomasville nodded and mumbled greetings without removing his thumb from his mouth, whereupon June began to express her gratitude. But thanks threw the Wag-boys into confusion, it seemed, and they quickly bade her an embarrassed good night.

Now that they had removed the weight of obligation that had rested upon them, the Wags became more neighborly. Llewellyn and the Scrap Iron Kid called to explain that the Dummy and Thomasville had broken all rules of friendship by "hogging the spotlight" and to express their own regret at having been absent during the attempted hold-up.

June was eating her midnight lunch when they came, and after they had left Llewellyn said:

"She didn't have any butter, Kid. Notice it?"

"Sure. Butter's peluk. Rothstein cornered the supply, and he's holding it for a raise."

"Where does he keep it?"

"In that big tent back of his store, along with his other stuff."

Now, the Wag-boys did nothing by halves. About dusk the following day the Rothstein watchman was accosted by a stranger who had just muched in from the creek. The two gossiped for a moment. Then, as the stranger made off, he slipped and fell, injuring himself so painfully that the watchman was forced to help him down to Kelly's drug-store. Upon returning from this labor of charity the watchman discovered, to his amazement and horror, that during his absence two men had entered the tent by means of a six-foot slit in the rear wall. They had brought a sled with them, moreover, and had made off with about five hundred dollars' worth of Rothstein's heart's blood, labeled "Cold Brook Creamery, Extra Fine."

The next morning when June returned to her cabin she found a case of butter.

A few days later the Dummy discovered a string of ptarmigan hanging beside the rear door of a restaurant, and, desiring to offer June some delicate little attention, he returned after dark and removed them. As ptarmigan were selling at five dollars a brace, he was careful to protect the girl; he sat on the back steps of the restaurant and picked the birds thoroughly, scattering the feathers with a careless hand.

Scarcely a day passed that June did not receive something from the Wags, but of course she never dreamed that her gifts had been stolen. As for her admirers, it was the highest mark of their esteem thus to lay at her feet the choicest fruits of their precarious labors, and, although they were common thieves--nay, worse than that--they stole rather from love of excitement than for hope of gain, and the more fantastic the adventure the more it tickled their distorted fancies.

They were most amusing, and June grew to like them immensely. She began to mother them in the way that pleases all women. She ruled them like a family of wayward children, she settled their disputes, and they submitted with subdued, though extravagant, joy. She asked Llewellyn once about that wound in his arm, but he lied fluently, and she believed him, for she was not the kind to credit evil of her friends.

Once they had received encouragement, they fairly monopolized her. She was never safe from interruption, for the Wag-boys never slept. They

came to her cabin singly and collectively at all hours of day or night, during her absence or during her presence, and they never failed to leave something behind them.

Reddy was a good cook, but he loathed a stove as he loathed a policeman, yet he donned an apron, and at the cost of much profanity and sweat produced a chocolate cake that would have done credit to a New England housewife. Furthermore, it bore June's name in a beautiful scroll surrounded by a chocolate wreath, and she found it on her bed when she came home one morning.

Chancing to express a liking for oysters in the hearing of the Scrap Iron Kid, she mysteriously received a whole case of them when she knew very well that there were none in camp. Of course she did not dream that in securing them the Kid had put his person in deadly peril.

On returning from her duties at another time she found that during the night the interior walls of her cabin had been painted, and, although she did not want them painted and although the smell gave her a violent headache, she pretended to be overcome with delight. In order to beautify her little nest Reddy had burgled a store and stolen all the paint there was of the particular shade that pleased his eye.

Now, the Wag-boys pretended to be care-free and happy as time went on. In reality they were gnawed by a secret trouble--it was June's growing fondness for Harry Hope. After careful observation they decided that the P. C. agent would not do at all; he was too wild. He had undeniably lost his head and was gambling heavily, tempted perhaps by the lax morality of the camp and the license of good times.

It was the Dummy who finally proposed a means of safeguarding June's wandering affections.

"Somebody's got to split her away from this Hope," he declared. "It's up to us, and Llewellyn's the only one in her class."

The Scrap Iron Kid's face assumed an ugly yellow cast as he inquired, quietly, "D'you mean George is to marry her?"

"Hardly!" exploded the Dummy. "Just toll her away."

"Why shouldn't I marry her?" Llewellyn demanded.

"I can think of five reasons," the Kid retorted. He tapped his chest with his finger. "Here's one, and there's the other four." He pointed to the other Wag-boys. "D'you think we'd let you marry her? Huh! I'd sooner marry her myself."

Llewellyn ended the discussion by stamping out of the cabin, cursing his

partners with violence.

Business of the P. C. Company took Harry Hope to Council City in February; so the Wags felt easier--but only for a time. They found that June was grieving for him, and were plunged into deep despair until Scrap Iron came home with the explanation that the lovers had quarreled before parting. It was a signal for a celebration during which Reddy cooked wildly for a week, making puddings and pies and pastries, most of which were smuggled into June's cabin. Thomasville journeyed out to a certain roadhouse run by a Frenchman, and returned with a case of eggs wrapped up in a woolen comforter. It required the combined perjury of the other Wags to prove an alibi for him, but June had an omelet every morning thereafter.

Then, just as they were weaning her away, as they thought, the blow fell. It came with a crushing force that left them dumb and panic-stricken. June took pneumonia! The Scrap Iron Kid brought the first news of her illness, and he blubbered like a baby, while Dummy, the woman-hater, cursed like a man bereft.

"How d'you know it's pneumonia?" queried Thomasville.

"The doc says so. Me 'n' George dropped in with some beefsteaks we copped from the butcher, and found her in bed, coughing like the devil. She couldn't get up--pains in her boosum. We run for Doc Whiting and--fellers, it's true! George is there now." The Kid swallowed bravely, and two tears rolled down his cheeks.

The Wag-boys broke out of their cabin on the run, then strung out down the snow-banked street toward June's cabin, where they found Dr. Whiting, very grave, and Llewellyn with his face blanched and his lips tight drawn. They tiptoed in and stood against the wall in a silent, stricken row, twirling their caps and trying to ease the pain in their throats.

The Wag-lady was indeed very ill. Her yellow hair was tumbled over her pillow and she was in great pain, but she smiled at them and made a feeble jest--which broke in her throat, for she was young and all alone and very badly frightened. It was too much for the Scrap Iron Kid, who stumbled out into the freezing night and fought with his misery. He tried to pray, but from long inexperience he fancied he made bad work of it.

An hour later they assembled and laid plans to weather the storm.

"She's worried about her hotel," Llewellyn announced. "If that was off her mind she'd have a better chance."

"Let's manage it for her," the Dummy offered. "I'll watch it to-night."

"An' who'll watch you?" queried the Kid.

"D'you reckon I'd run out on a pal like June?" stormed the Dummy, whereat Scrap Iron assured him he was positive that he would not, for the very good reason that he and Reddy would take care that no opportunity offered.

"You run the joint like you say, an' we'll lookout her game for her; then to-morrow night the other three can do it. We'll take turn an' turn about, an' them that's off shift will nurse her. I've been thinkin' now--if only we knowed something about women folks--"

"I been married once or twice, if that's any good," Thomasville ventured to confess; whereupon he was elected head nurse by virtue of his experience, and accordingly they went to work.

Dr. Whiting had promised to secure a woman to care for the sick girl, but women were scarce that winter and he was only partly successful, so the greater portion of the responsibility fell upon the Wags. He also spoke of removing June to the excuse for a hospital, but they would not hear to this. And so the battle for her life began.

It was a battle, too, for she grew rapidly worse and soon was delirious, babbling of strange things which tore at the hearts of the Wag-boys. Day after day, night after night, she lay racked and tortured, fighting the brave fight of youth, and through it all the six thieves tended her. They were ever at her side, coming and going like the wraiths of her distorted fancy, and while three of them divided the day into watches the other three ran the bunk-house, keeping strict account of every penny taken in. They O. K.'d one another's books, and it would have fared badly indeed with any one of them had he allowed the least discrepancy to appear in his reckoning.

It was a strange scene, this, a sick and friendless girl mothered by a gang of crooks. When June's condition improved they rejoiced with a deep ferocity that was pitiful; when it grew worse they went about hushed and terror-stricken. Through it all she called incessantly for Harry Hope, and it was Llewellyn who finally volunteered to go to Council City and fetch him--an offer that showed the others he was game.

But before the weather had settled sufficiently to allow it, Hope came. He arrived one night in a blinding smother which whined down over the treeless wastes, driving men indoors before its fury. Hearing of June's illness, he had taken the trail within an hour, fighting his way for a hundred trackless miles through a blizzard that daunted even a Wag-boy, and he showed the marks of battle. His face was bitten deeply by the cold, his dogs were dying in the harness, and it was evident that he had not slept for many hours. He whimpered like a child when Llewellyn met

him at June's door; then he heard her wearily babbling his name, as she had done these many, many days, and he went in, kneeling beside her with his frozen breath still caked upon his parka hood.

Llewellyn stood by and heard him tenderly calling to the wandering girl, saw the peace that came into her face as something told her he was near; then the Wag-boy who had once been a gentleman came forward and gave Hope his hand, and thanked him for his coming.

June began to mend after that, and it was not long before Whiting said she might recover if she had proper food. She would, however, need nourishment--milk; but there was only one cow in camp, and other sick people, and not sufficient milk to go round. The Wag-boys lumped their bank-rolls and offered to buy the animal from its owner, but he refused. So they stole the cow and all her fodder.

Now it is no difficult matter to steal a cow, even in a mining-camp in the dead of winter, but it is not nearly so easy for a cow to remain stolen under such conditions, and the Wags were hard put to prevent discovery. It would have been far easier, they realized, to steal a two-story brick house or a printing-office, and then, too, not one of them knew how to secure the milk even after they had gained the cow's consent. They made various experiments, however, one of which resulted in Reddy's having the breath rammed out of him, and another causing Thomasville to adopt crutches for a day or so. But eventually June got her milk, a gallon of it daily. Every night or two the cow had to be moved, every day they gagged her to muffle her voice. Then, when discovery was imminent, they made terms of surrender, exacting twenty-five per cent. of the gross output as the consideration for her return.

They breathed much easier when the cow was off their hands.

Spring was in sight when June became strong enough to take up her duties, and she was surprised to find her hotel running as usual, also a flour-sack full of currency beneath her bed, together with a set of books showing her receipts. It was signed by Llewellyn and witnessed by the other Wags. There was no record of disbursements.

One day Whiting advised her to get out in the air, and the Scrap Iron Kid volunteered to take her for a dog ride.

"I didn't know you had a team," she said.

"Who? Me? Sure! I got as good a team as ever you see," he declared, and when she accepted his invitation he proceeded to get his dogs together in a startling manner. He tied a soup-bone on a string and walked the back streets; then, when he beheld a likely-looking husky, he dragged the bone behind him, enticing the animal by degrees to the Wag-boys'

cabin, where he promptly tied it up. He repeated the performance seven times. The matter of harness and sled was but a detail; so June enjoyed a ride that put pink roses into her cheeks and gave the Scrap Iron Kid a feeling of pure, exalted joy such as he had never felt in all his adventurous career.

The day she walked over to the Wag house unassisted was one of such wild rejoicing that she was forced to tell them shyly of her own happiness, a happiness so new that as yet she could scarcely credit it. She was to be Mrs. Harry Hope, and asked them to wish her joy.

Llewellyn made a speech that evoked the admiration of them all, even to the Kid, who was miserably jealous, and June went home with her heart very warm and tender toward these six adventurers who had been so true to her.

It was to be expected that Hope would share in his sweetheart's extravagant gladness, for he loved her deeply, with all the force of his big, strong nature, yet he acted strangely as time went on. Now he was sad and worried, again he seemed tortured by a lurking disquietude of spirit. This alarmed the Wag-lady, and she set out to find the secret of his trouble.

The ice was breaking when he made a clean breast of it, and when he had finished June felt that her heart was breaking also. It was the commonplace story of a young man tempted beyond his strength. Hope's popularity had made him a host of friends, while his generosity had made "no" a difficult answer. He had plunged into excesses during the early winter; gambled wildly, not to win, but for the fun of it. He had lost company money, trusting to his ability to make it good from his own pocket when the time came. The time was coming, and his pockets were empty. Spring was here, the first boats would arrive any day, and with them would come the P. C. men to audit his accounts. It was possible to cover it up, to be sure, but he scorned to falsify his books.

"I should have stayed in Council City," he said, "but when I heard you were--sick--" He buried his brown face in his hands.

The girl's lips were white as she asked, "How much is it?"

"Nearly twenty thousand."

She shook her head hopelessly. "I haven't nearly that much, Harry, but perhaps they would let us pay off the balance as we are able."

"June!" he cried. "I wouldn't let you! I'll go to jail first! I--I suppose you won't want to marry me, now that you know?"

"I love you more than twenty thousand dollars' worth," she replied.

"We'll face it out together."

"If only I had time I could pay it back and they'd never know, for I have property that will sell, once the season opens."

"Then you must take time."

"I can't. Sternberg will tell."

"What has Sternberg to do with it?"

"I lost the money in his place--his books will show. He suspects, even now, and he's talking about it. He doesn't like me, you know, since he heard of our engagement."

The days fled swiftly by; the hills thrust their scarred sides up through the melting snow; the open sea showed black beyond the rim of anchor ice. As nature awoke and blossomed, June faded and shrank until she was no more than the ghost of her former self. Then one day smoke was reported upon the horizon, and the town became a bedlam; for the door of the frozen North was creaking on its hinges, and just beyond lay the good, glad world of men and things.

June could stand it no longer; so she told her sorrow to Llewellyn, who had half guessed it, anyhow, and he in turn retold it to his fellow-Wags.

The Scrap Iron Kid was for killing Hope at once, and argued that it was by far the simplest way out of June's trouble, carrying with it also an agreeable element of retribution. Hope had hurt the Wag-lady, therefore the least atonement he could offer was his blood. But Dummy, the foxy old alibi man of the outfit, said:

"I've got a better scheme. Hope wants to do the right thing, and June'll make him if she has a chance. The company will get its coin, she'll get her square guy, an' nobody'll be hurt, provided he has time to swing himself. The ace in the hole is Sammy Sternberg; he's got the books. Now what's the answer?"

"Steal the books!" chorused the Wags; and Dummy smiled.

"Why, sure."

"You can't stick up no saloon full of rough-necks and sleepers," said Scrap Iron. "Sammy caches his books in the safe when he's off shift, and we can't blow the safe, 'cause the joint never closes."

But the Dummy only grinned, for this was the sort of job he liked, and then he proceeded to make known his plan.

Those were terrible hours for June. She prayed with all the earnestness of her earnest being that her lover might be spared; repeatedly she strained her tear-filled eyes to the southward. As for Hope, he had tasted the consequences of his guilt, and his face grew lined and haggard with the strain of waiting. He could have met the future with some show of resignation had it not been for the knowledge of his sweetheart's suffering; but as the hours passed and that thin black line of soot still hung upon the horizon, he thought he would go mad.

On the second day a steamer showed, hull down, having wormed her way through the floes, and Nome marched out upon the shore ice in a body.

June and Harry went with the others, hand in hand, and the man walked as if he were marching to the gallows. It was not the P. C. steamer, after all; it was the whaler Jeanie. The fleet was in the offing, however, so she reported, and would be in within another twenty-four hours, if the pack kept drifting.

Hope ground his teeth, and muttered: "Poor little June! I wish it were over for your sake!" and she nodded wearily.

But as they neared the shore again they heard rumors of strange doings in their absence. There had been a daring daylight hold-up at the Miners' Rest. Six masked men had taken advantage of the exodus to enter and clean out the place at the point of the gun, and now Sammy Sternberg was poisoning the air with his complaints.

Details came flying faster as they trudged up into Front Street, and Doc Whiting paused to say:

"That's the nerviest thing yet, eh, Harry?"

"Was anybody hurt?"

"No damage done except to Sammy's feelings."

"They surely didn't get much money?"

"Oh, no! Their total clean-up wasn't a hundred dollars; but they lugged off Sammy's books."

June felt herself falling, and grasped weakly at her lover's arm, for she saw it all. "Come!" she said, and dragged him up to her own cabin, then on to the Wag-boys' door. They were all there, sprawled about and smoking.

"You did this!" she said, shakingly. "You did it for me!"

"Did what?" they asked in chorus, looking at her blankly.

"Oh, we know," said Harry Hope. "You've given me a chance--and I'll make good!" His own voice sounded strange in his ears.

There was an instant's awkward pause, and then the Scrap Iron Kid said, simply, "You'd better!" and the others nodded.

Llewellyn spoke up, saying, "Reddy is our regular chef; but I'd like to have you see me cook a goose." Then he drew from his inside pocket what seemed to be a leaf torn from a ledger, and, unfolding it, he struck a match, then lighted it.

"I suppose I ought to be a man and face the music," Hope managed to stutter, "but I'm going to cheat the ends of justice for June's sake. I'm much obliged to you."

When they had gone off, hand in hand, the Scrap Iron Kid nodded approvingly to George, saying, "That was sure some cookin' you did, pal."

And Llewellyn answered, "Yes, I cooked your goose and mine, but she'll be happy, anyhow."

JUMPING AT CONCLUSIONS

Project Gutenberg's *Tales from the X-bar Horse Camp*, by Will C. Barnes

It certainly seemed good to be back on the old range again after a six months' absence. As we "topped" the last hill I pulled up the team. Down in the Valley below us the white adobe walls of the ranch house, like some desert light house, blazed through the glorious green of the cottonwoods that hovered about it. To its right a brown circle marked the big stockade corral. A smooth mirror-like spot out in the flat in front of the house was the stock-watering reservoir, into which the windmill, seconded by an asthmatic little gas engine, pumped water from the depths. Above it the galvanized iron sails of the great mill glittered and flickered and winked in the bright sunlight as if to welcome us home. A cloud of dust stringing off into the distance marked the trail where a bunch of "broom tails" were scurrying out onto the range after filling themselves at the tank with water and salt.

Suddenly, a gleam of color caught our eyes. It was "Old Glory" at the top of the tall pole, stirred by a little gust of wind that shook out

its folds, the green of the trees making a splendid background. Evidently the boys were expecting us, for the flag was only run up on holidays, Sundays, and when guests were due to arrive.

A soft hand slipped quietly into mine. "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home," she sang, and as the words of the homesick, world-tired Payne came from her lips, there came into my throat a great lump, my eyes filled with tears, and to us both, the sage brush plain shimmering and baking in the bright Arizona sunshine, those brown rugged mountains in the distance and that desert oasis in the foreground were by far the loveliest thing we had seen in all our travels. The team, too, seemed to sense our feelings, for they freshened up and took us across the intervening distance as if they had not already made a good forty miles from the railroad.

Old Dad, the ranch cook, was at the "snorting post" to greet us as we pulled up, and we soon were sitting on the broad veranda plying the old rascal with questions about the work, the men, and all the happenings while we had been away; for of all forlorn, unsatisfactory things on earth the worst are the letters written by the average cow-puncher ranch foreman concerning matters upon which his absent boss has requested full and frequent information.

One of the first anxious inquiries on the part of the madam was as to the whereabouts of her Boston terrier, a bench show prize winner sent out to her shortly before we left. The letter accompanying the dog advised us that, barring accidents, the animal should in a few months bring into the world some offspring, which, considering its parentage, ought to bring fancy prices on the dog market.

"Where's Beauty?" she asked.

"I reckon she done went off with the boys this morning. They's down to Walnut Spring, buildin' a new corral."

"But didn't she--er--hasn't she--" She looked at me appealingly.

"Where are her pups?" was my blunt inquiry.

"Them pups?" The old man took his pipe from his jaws. A queer look flashed across his brown face; he chuckled as if the words brought up some rather amusing recollection. Now, old Dad was one of the worst practical jokers in the West. Nor did he count the cost or think of the results as long as he could carry his point, and fool some one with one of his wildly improbable yarns. To "pick a load" into some innocent tenderfoot was his most joyous occupation. I waited patiently for him to recover from the fit of mirth into which my innocent question seemed to have plunged him. There was a look of extreme disgust on the face of the lady sitting nearby.

"Ye 'member that there young kid-like chap what drifted in here last spring after the steer gatherin'?" Again that witless chuckle.

Yes, I remembered. We both did--the madam nodded.

"Well, along about the time them there pups came into this here state of Arizony"--the madam's face lighted; there were some pups after all--"the kid and I was here at the ranch all alone, the whole outfit bein' out on the _rodeo_, an' we havin' been left behind to watch the pasture fence, where a bunch of yearlin's was bein' weaned. One mornin' the kid busted into the kitchen. 'The mut's got four purps! Come an' look at em; they's all de-formed!' ses he, almost breathless with the news."

(Business of surprise and horror on part of listening lady.)

"De-formed?" ses I.

"That's what I sed,' he snaps back at me."

(More business of S. and H. on part of lady; also friend husband.)

"I follers the kid out to the shed back of the house, where the dog had a pile of ole saddle blankets for a bed, and sure enough she had four white faced brindle purps all right, whinin' an' sniffin' just as purps allers does.

"What's wrong with 'em?' says I, me not seein' anything de-formed about 'em.

"Hell' ses he, 'can't you see they's all de-formed?'

"Search me,' ses I, lookin' 'em all over carefully.

"The kid picked up two of 'em. 'Lookit them tails then.' He turned one of 'em around. Now Beauty ain't got no great shakes of a tail herself, but what she has is straight. 'By Heck!' ses I, seein' a chanst to have some fun with him, 'sure enough, they is sort of de-formed in their little ole _colas_. Reckon they's no use botherin' to raise 'em, is they--what with their tails all as crooked as a gimlet. Too bad, too bad,' ses I, 'fer the missus will be monstrously disapp'inted over it.'

"They's every dad burned one of 'em got a watch eye too, jist like that there ole Pinto hoss I rides.' The kid's sure worried.

"Wuss an' more of it,' I comes back at him.

"What we goin' to do with 'em?' droppin' the animiles back into the blankets.

"'Nothin', I reckon,' lookin' straight down my nose, 'less'n we drownds 'em--said job not bein' one I'm actually hankerin' fer.'"

[Illustration: " _The galvanized iron sails of the windmill flashed in the sunlight_ "]

(Business of fury, anger and indignation, with signs of approaching tears on part of listening lady.)

"You blithering old idiot!" I shrieked, "do you mean to say that you loaded the kid with that sort of a story till he went off and drowned those valuable pups under the mistaken impression that they were deformed and therefore worthless?" I glared at him as if to wither his old carcass with one look. (More of above mentioned business by lady--with real tears.)

"Well"--and the old renegade emitted that infernal chuckle again--"well, how should I sense that he didn't savvy that crooked tails and a glass eye were sure enough signs of birth an' breedin' with them there Boston terriers?" He looked away; we felt sure he dared not face the wrath in both our eyes.

I stormed up and down the porch for a few moments, speechless. The lady was registering every known phase of indignation. Her voice, however, was silent. Evidently there are times in her life when words fail her. This was one of them.

"Where's that kid?" I finally demanded. "I want to have a little heart to heart talk with that _hombre_! As for you"--and I tried to look the indignation I knew the madam felt--"it seems to me your fondness for picking loads into idiots green enough to be fooled by such a gabbling old ass as you are has gone just about far enough. After I've seen the kid, I'll talk to you further."

Old Dad was slowly and carefully reloading his pipe. From his shirt pocket he dug a match. With most aggravating deliberation he struck it on the door-post against which he leaned, held it over the bowl, gave several long pulls at the pipe to assure himself it was well lit before he even deigned to raise his keen gray eyes to mine. The madam's face was a study in expression. "Where's the kid?" I really thought he had not heard my first inquiry as to the whereabouts of that individual.

"Where's he at?" with the grandest look of innocent inquiry on his weather beaten face that could possibly be imagined. For mere facial expression he should be a star performer in some big movie company.

"Yes!" I snapped out the words as if to annihilate him. "I want to hold sweet converse with him, _muy pronto, sabe_?"

"Well, he's _vamosed_ --drifted yonderly" and he waved his pipe towards the eastern horizon.

"Ahead of the sheriff?" I never did have much faith in the young gentleman from Missouri.

"Yep--in a way he was." Once more that devilish chuckle.

I saw the old man evidently had a story concealed about his person and that, with his usual contrariness the more we crowded him the longer he would be in getting it out of his system. I dropped angrily into the porch swing, where I could watch his face, while the madam sat herself down on the steps of the porch apparently utterly oblivious of everything but the sage-dotted prairie spread out before us. Finally the aged provision spoiler began to emit words.

"The last time the outfit shipped steers over at the railroad," he said slowly, "the kid he tanked up pretty consid'able till he's a feeling his oats, an' imaginin' hisself a reg'lar wild man from Borneo, and everything leading up to his gittin' into trouble before he was many hours older. Comes trotting down the sidewalk old man Kates, the Justice of the Peace who, on account of his gittin' the fees in all cases brought up before him, was allers on the lookout for biz. Also he done set into a poker game the night before and lose his whole pile, which didn't tend to make him view this here world through no very rosy specs. The kid comes swaggering along and the two meets up jist in front of the 'Bucket of Blood' saloon. You know Kates he allers wears a plug hat, one of them there old timers of the vintage of '73 or thereabouts, an' the kid he bein' a comparative stranger in these parts, and not knowin' who the judge was nor havin' seen any such headgear for some time, he ses to hisself, 'Right here's where I gits action on that _sombrero grande_', and he manages to bump into the judge in such a way as to knock off the tile, and before it hits the ground the kid was filling it so full of holes that it looked like some black colander.

"Every one came pouring out of the saloon and nearby stores to see what was up, and the judge he takes advantage of the kid's having to stop and reload his six pistol, to relieve hisself of some of the most expressive and profane language ever heard in the burg before or since, windin' up by informin' the gent from ole Missou that he was goin' straight to his office and swear out a warrant for him and send him down to Yuma by the next train.

"When the boys tells the kid who he's been tamperin' with he gits onto his hoss and tears outa town like hell a-beatin' tanbark, he havin' no particular likin' for court proceedin's, owing to several little happenin's in that line down on the Pecos in Texas. About a week later the sheriff he gits a tip that the kid's probably hangin' out at Deafy

Morris's sheep camp up on Wild Cat, so he saunters up that a-way and nabs the young gent as he's a helpin' Deafy fix up his shearin' pens. Sheriff he sort of throws a skeer into the kid, tellin' him Kates is liable to send him up for ten years for assaultin' the honor and dignity of a J. P., but the kid's mighty foxy and also plumb sober by that time, and he tells the sheriff he's willing to go back to town and take his medicine.

"Next morning Deafy he ses as how he's a-goin' down to town, and the sheriff, havin' got track of somebody else he's a wantin' up on the mountain, and believin' the kid's story about bein' willing to go to town, he deputizes Deafy to take him in and deliver him at the 'Hoosgow.' [D]

[D] Jusgado--The prisoner's dock in a Spanish criminal court.

"Deafy he tells the sheriff he's not a goin' clean through to town that day, but is a-goin' to camp at the Jacob's Well, a place about half way down, on the edge of the pines, where he's arranged to meet up with the camp rustler of one of his bands of sheep grazin' in that section. Ever been at that there Jacob's Well?" And the old man looked at me inquiringly. I nodded affirmatively.

The Jacob's Well was located in the center of a very large level mass of sandstone covering perhaps three or four acres, with a dense thicket of cedar and piñon trees all about it. It was a fairly round hole about five feet wide and perhaps ten deep, bored down into the sandstone formation either by human agency or some peculiar action of nature. The lay of the rocks all about it was such as to form a regular watershed, so that the natural drainage from the rain and snow kept it nearly filled almost all the year round.

Just what made this well was a moot question in the country. A scientific investigator promptly put it down to the action of hard flint rocks lying in a small depression and rolled about by the wind until they dug a little basin in the rock, then the water collecting in it continued the attrition until, finally, after what may have been ages, the well was the result. My private opinion was that it was the work of prehistoric or even modern Indians who, wishing to secure a supply of water at this particular point, possibly for hunting purposes, formed the hole by fire. A large fire was built upon the rock, then when at a white heat water was thrown upon it, causing the stone to flake and crack so it could easily be removed. This was a slow process, of course, but having myself once seen a party of Apache squaws by the same primitive means remove over half of a huge boulder that lay directly in the line of an irrigating ditch they were digging, and which they otherwise could not get around, I am convinced the scientific person missed the true methods employed to excavate the hole.

However, without regard to its origin, the well was a fine camping place, for water was scarce in that region and there was always good grass for the horses near it. The old man rambled on.

"Deafy he gits a poor start next mornin' 'count of a pack mule what insisted on buckin' the pack off a couple of times and scatterin' the load rather promisc'ous-like over the landscape, an' by the time they reached the well it was plumb dark. They unsaddles and hobbles their hosses out, and then Deafy he sets to work buildin' a fire, tellin' the kid to take his saddle rope and the coffee pot and git some water. The kid he's never been there afore, but Deafy tells him the well's only about a hundred feet from where they unpacked, so he moseys out into the dark lookin' for the well, his rope in one hand, the camp coffee pot in 'tother, the idee bein' to let the pot down into the well with the rope.

"It were sure dark in them trees, and the kid he's a blunderin' and stumblin' along, a-cursin' the world by sections, when all to once he stepped off into fresh air, and the next thing he knows he's a standin' at the bottom of the well in about four or five feet of ice-cold water, and him a-still hangin' onto the rope and pot with a death grip. Took him about five minutes to git his breath and realize he done found the well all rightee, and then he sets up a squall like a trapped wildcat. He ain't forgot, neither, that Deafy ain't likely to hear him, the ole man bein' deafer than a rock; so after hollerin' a while and gittin' no results he stops it and begins cussin' jist to relieve his mind and help keep him from shakin' all his teeth outen his head account o' shiverin' so blamed hard.

"Up on top Deafy he's busy startin' a fire and openin' up the packs gittin' ready to cook supper. The kid not bein' back with the water yit, and he bein' obliged to have water fer bread makin' purposes, Deafy finally decides the kid's gone and got hisself lost out there in the dark, and so he takes a _pasear_ out that a-way huntin' fer him. The ole man's a hollerin' and a trompin' through the cedars an' rocks, thinkin' more how much his wool's a-goin' to fetch than anything else, when he thinks he hears someone a-callin'. He turns to listen, gits a little more sound in his ears, takes a step or two in its direction, and, kerslop, he's into that there well hole, square on top of the young gent from 'ole Missou'. Say, the things them two fellers sed to each other, an' both at the same time, most cracked the walls of the hole."

Dad wiped his eyes with the heel of his fat hand.

"Talk about your Kilkenny cats," he continued, "they wan't in it with them two pore devils down in that cold water. Finally, they both run out of mouth ammunition an' set to work to figger out how they was goin' to git outen the well. It was too wide to climb out of by puttin' a foot on each side and coonin' up the walls like a straddle bug, an' it was mostly too deep for either of 'em to reach the top with their hands. So

they mighty soon agrees between 'em that there's but one way to git out, an' that's fer one of 'em to stand on 'tother's shoulder so's to git a grip on the edge, pull hisself out, an' then help his shiverin', shakin' _amigo_ what's down in the hole onto terry firmy. Bein' a foot taller than Deafy, Bob agrees that the old man can climb onto his shoulders an' git out first. But Deafy, he's heavy on his feet, an' bein' sixty years old an' none too spry, he cain't seem to make the riffle to git onto the kid's back, so he finally gives it up, an' lets the kid have a try at it. The kid he's soon on Deafy's shoulders, an' one jump an' he's on top.

"Meantime the kid he's been doin' some powerful hard thinkin'. He ain't hankerin' after a close-up view of that there indignant judge down in town. The sheep man he's got a monstrous fine hoss, a new Heiser saddle, an' a jim dandy pack mule and outfit, while his own hoss an' saddle ain't nothin' much to brag on. He knows the sheep man's dead safe where he's at till some one comes to help him out, which will be when his camp rustler arrives on the scene, which may be in an hour an' may be in ten minutes. Meantime, bein' a cow-puncher bred and born on the Pecos, he ain't lovin' a sheep person any too well, so he makes up his mind he jist as well die for an 'ole sheep as a lamb, and within ten minutes he's hittin' the trail for New Mexico a straddle of Deafy's hoss an' saddle, leadin' his pack mule, with a bully good pack rig onto his back.

"Also the pore old feller down in the well is a holdin' up his hands expectin' every minute the kid will reach down an' help him out; incidentally, as far as his chatterin' teeth will let him, doin' some mighty fancy cussin' along broad an' liberal lines."

Dad stopped a moment to light his pipe. My curiosity could wait no longer.

"What happened to Deafy and how did he get out?" burst from my eager lips.

Once again that chuckle. "Seems he tole the camp rustler to meet him there that night, but the _paisano_ was late gittin' his sheep bedded down on account of a bear skeerin' of 'em just about sundown, so he didn't git round till the kid had done been gone for two hours. Even then he might not 'a' found him, for the fire was all out an' it was too dark to see much, but the ole man he had his six shooter with him when he started in to bathe, also about forty beans in his catridge belt. Knowin' mighty well his only hope was in drawin' some one's attention with his shootin', he was mighty economical with his beans, only shootin' about onc't every five minutes. The herder he hears him, runs the sound down, an' finds his ole boss a soakin' in the well, him bein' jist about ready to cash in his chips, he's that numbed and chilled."

"And the kid?" gasped the lady listener.

"Oh, he done got clean away over the line into New Mexico and they ain't never got no track of him to this very yit."

We heard a raucous squeak from the corral back of the house, indicating the opening of one of the heavy pole gates. Evidently the boys had come in. I was just rising from my seat in the swing, when from around the corner of the house dashed a brindle Boston terrier, followed by four crazy pups about two months old. The mother barked a joyous welcome to the madam, to whom she flew and in whose arms she found a warm reception. I turned to the cook. That same aggravating chuckle again.

"But you told us they were drowned" was the only thing the amazed and perplexed woman could find words to utter.

The old reprobate was gazing into the bowl of his pipe as if in its depths he had found something extremely interesting. I began to see a light.

"You miserable old hot air artist!" I said. "You picked a load into us the very first hour after we landed on the ranch, didn't you? You've been humbugging us all this time, haven't you?" I tried hard to be fiercely indignant.

"You fooled your own selves," he snickered, "fer I never tole you them there pups was drowned; you jist nachelly jumped at it of your own accord, an' seein' as how you'd find it out anyhow when the boys came in, I jist let it run along."

THE SINS OF PRINCE SARADINE

Project Gutenberg's *The Innocence of Father Brown*, by G. K. Chesterton

When Flambeau took his month's holiday from his office in Westminster he took it in a small sailing-boat, so small that it passed much of its time as a rowing-boat. He took it, moreover, in little rivers in the Eastern counties, rivers so small that the boat looked like a magic boat, sailing on land through meadows and cornfields. The vessel was just comfortable for two people; there was room only for necessities, and Flambeau had stocked it with such things as his special philosophy considered necessary. They reduced themselves, apparently, to four essentials: tins of salmon, if he should want to eat; loaded revolvers, if he should want to fight; a bottle of brandy, presumably in case he should faint; and a priest, presumably in case he should die. With this light luggage he crawled down the little Norfolk rivers, intending to reach the Broads at last, but meanwhile delighting in the overhanging

gardens and meadows, the mirrored mansions or villages, lingering to fish in the pools and corners, and in some sense hugging the shore.

Like a true philosopher, Flambeau had no aim in his holiday; but, like a true philosopher, he had an excuse. He had a sort of half purpose, which he took just so seriously that its success would crown the holiday, but just so lightly that its failure would not spoil it. Years ago, when he had been a king of thieves and the most famous figure in Paris, he had often received wild communications of approval, denunciation, or even love; but one had, somehow, stuck in his memory. It consisted simply of a visiting-card, in an envelope with an English postmark. On the back of the card was written in French and in green ink: "If you ever retire and become respectable, come and see me. I want to meet you, for I have met all the other great men of my time. That trick of yours of getting one detective to arrest the other was the most splendid scene in French history." On the front of the card was engraved in the formal fashion, "Prince Saradine, Reed House, Reed Island, Norfolk."

He had not troubled much about the prince then, beyond ascertaining that he had been a brilliant and fashionable figure in southern Italy. In his youth, it was said, he had eloped with a married woman of high rank; the escapade was scarcely startling in his social world, but it had clung to men's minds because of an additional tragedy: the alleged suicide of the insulted husband, who appeared to have flung himself over a precipice in Sicily. The prince then lived in Vienna for a time, but his more recent years seemed to have been passed in perpetual and restless travel. But when Flambeau, like the prince himself, had left European celebrity and settled in England, it occurred to him that he might pay a surprise visit to this eminent exile in the Norfolk Broads. Whether he should find the place he had no idea; and, indeed, it was sufficiently small and forgotten. But, as things fell out, he found it much sooner than he expected.

They had moored their boat one night under a bank veiled in high grasses and short pollarded trees. Sleep, after heavy sculling, had come to them early, and by a corresponding accident they awoke before it was light. To speak more strictly, they awoke before it was daylight; for a large lemon moon was only just setting in the forest of high grass above their heads, and the sky was of a vivid violet-blue, nocturnal but bright. Both men had simultaneously a reminiscence of childhood, of the elfin and adventurous time when tall weeds close over us like woods. Standing up thus against the large low moon, the daisies really seemed to be giant daisies, the dandelions to be giant dandelions. Somehow it reminded them of the dado of a nursery wall-paper. The drop of the river-bed sufficed to sink them under the roots of all shrubs and flowers and make them gaze upwards at the grass. "By Jove!" said Flambeau, "it's like being in fairyland."

Father Brown sat bolt upright in the boat and crossed himself. His

movement was so abrupt that his friend asked him, with a mild stare, what was the matter.

“The people who wrote the mediaeval ballads,” answered the priest, “knew more about fairies than you do. It isn’t only nice things that happen in fairyland.”

“Oh, bosh!” said Flambeau. “Only nice things could happen under such an innocent moon. I am for pushing on now and seeing what does really come. We may die and rot before we ever see again such a moon or such a mood.”

“All right,” said Father Brown. “I never said it was always wrong to enter fairyland. I only said it was always dangerous.”

They pushed slowly up the brightening river; the glowing violet of the sky and the pale gold of the moon grew fainter and fainter, and faded into that vast colourless cosmos that precedes the colours of the dawn. When the first faint stripes of red and gold and grey split the horizon from end to end they were broken by the black bulk of a town or village which sat on the river just ahead of them. It was already an easy twilight, in which all things were visible, when they came under the hanging roofs and bridges of this riverside hamlet. The houses, with their long, low, stooping roofs, seemed to come down to drink at the river, like huge grey and red cattle. The broadening and whitening dawn had already turned to working daylight before they saw any living creature on the wharves and bridges of that silent town. Eventually they saw a very placid and prosperous man in his shirt sleeves, with a face as round as the recently sunken moon, and rays of red whisker around the low arc of it, who was leaning on a post above the sluggish tide. By an impulse not to be analysed, Flambeau rose to his full height in the swaying boat and shouted at the man to ask if he knew Reed Island or Reed House. The prosperous man’s smile grew slightly more expansive, and he simply pointed up the river towards the next bend of it. Flambeau went ahead without further speech.

The boat took many such grassy corners and followed many such reedy and silent reaches of river; but before the search had become monotonous they had swung round a specially sharp angle and come into the silence of a sort of pool or lake, the sight of which instinctively arrested them. For in the middle of this wider piece of water, fringed on every side with rushes, lay a long, low islet, along which ran a long, low house or bungalow built of bamboo or some kind of tough tropic cane. The upstanding rods of bamboo which made the walls were pale yellow, the sloping rods that made the roof were of darker red or brown, otherwise the long house was a thing of repetition and monotony. The early morning breeze rustled the reeds round the island and sang in the strange ribbed house as in a giant pan-pipe.

“By George!” cried Flambeau; “here is the place, after all! Here is Reed

Island, if ever there was one. Here is Reed House, if it is anywhere. I believe that fat man with whiskers was a fairy.”

“Perhaps,” remarked Father Brown impartially. “If he was, he was a bad fairy.”

But even as he spoke the impetuous Flambeau had run his boat ashore in the rattling reeds, and they stood in the long, quaint islet beside the odd and silent house.

The house stood with its back, as it were, to the river and the only landing-stage; the main entrance was on the other side, and looked down the long island garden. The visitors approached it, therefore, by a small path running round nearly three sides of the house, close under the low eaves. Through three different windows on three different sides they looked in on the same long, well-lit room, panelled in light wood, with a large number of looking-glasses, and laid out as for an elegant lunch. The front door, when they came round to it at last, was flanked by two turquoise-blue flower pots. It was opened by a butler of the drearier type--long, lean, grey and listless--who murmured that Prince Saradine was from home at present, but was expected hourly; the house being kept ready for him and his guests. The exhibition of the card with the scrawl of green ink awoke a flicker of life in the parchment face of the depressed retainer, and it was with a certain shaky courtesy that he suggested that the strangers should remain. “His Highness may be here any minute,” he said, “and would be distressed to have just missed any gentleman he had invited. We have orders always to keep a little cold lunch for him and his friends, and I am sure he would wish it to be offered.”

Moved with curiosity to this minor adventure, Flambeau assented gracefully, and followed the old man, who ushered him ceremoniously into the long, lightly panelled room. There was nothing very notable about it, except the rather unusual alternation of many long, low windows with many long, low oblongs of looking-glass, which gave a singular air of lightness and unsubstantialness to the place. It was somehow like lunching out of doors. One or two pictures of a quiet kind hung in the corners, one a large grey photograph of a very young man in uniform, another a red chalk sketch of two long-haired boys. Asked by Flambeau whether the soldierly person was the prince, the butler answered shortly in the negative; it was the prince’s younger brother, Captain Stephen Saradine, he said. And with that the old man seemed to dry up suddenly and lose all taste for conversation.

After lunch had tailed off with exquisite coffee and liqueurs, the guests were introduced to the garden, the library, and the housekeeper--a dark, handsome lady, of no little majesty, and rather like a plutonic Madonna. It appeared that she and the butler were the only survivors of the prince’s original foreign menage the other

servants now in the house being new and collected in Norfolk by the housekeeper. This latter lady went by the name of Mrs. Anthony, but she spoke with a slight Italian accent, and Flambeau did not doubt that Anthony was a Norfolk version of some more Latin name. Mr. Paul, the butler, also had a faintly foreign air, but he was in tongue and training English, as are many of the most polished men-servants of the cosmopolitan nobility.

Pretty and unique as it was, the place had about it a curious luminous sadness. Hours passed in it like days. The long, well-windowed rooms were full of daylight, but it seemed a dead daylight. And through all other incidental noises, the sound of talk, the clink of glasses, or the passing feet of servants, they could hear on all sides of the house the melancholy noise of the river.

“We have taken a wrong turning, and come to a wrong place,” said Father Brown, looking out of the window at the grey-green sedges and the silver flood. “Never mind; one can sometimes do good by being the right person in the wrong place.”

Father Brown, though commonly a silent, was an oddly sympathetic little man, and in those few but endless hours he unconsciously sank deeper into the secrets of Reed House than his professional friend. He had that knack of friendly silence which is so essential to gossip; and saying scarcely a word, he probably obtained from his new acquaintances all that in any case they would have told. The butler indeed was naturally uncommunicative. He betrayed a sullen and almost animal affection for his master; who, he said, had been very badly treated. The chief offender seemed to be his highness’s brother, whose name alone would lengthen the old man’s lantern jaws and pucker his parrot nose into a sneer. Captain Stephen was a ne’er-do-well, apparently, and had drained his benevolent brother of hundreds and thousands; forced him to fly from fashionable life and live quietly in this retreat. That was all Paul, the butler, would say, and Paul was obviously a partisan.

The Italian housekeeper was somewhat more communicative, being, as Brown fancied, somewhat less content. Her tone about her master was faintly acid; though not without a certain awe. Flambeau and his friend were standing in the room of the looking-glasses examining the red sketch of the two boys, when the housekeeper swept in swiftly on some domestic errand. It was a peculiarity of this glittering, glass-panelled place that anyone entering was reflected in four or five mirrors at once; and Father Brown, without turning round, stopped in the middle of a sentence of family criticism. But Flambeau, who had his face close up to the picture, was already saying in a loud voice, “The brothers Saradine, I suppose. They both look innocent enough. It would be hard to say which is the good brother and which the bad.” Then, realising the lady’s presence, he turned the conversation with some triviality, and strolled out into the garden. But Father Brown still gazed steadily at the red

crayon sketch; and Mrs. Anthony still gazed steadily at Father Brown.

She had large and tragic brown eyes, and her olive face glowed darkly with a curious and painful wonder--as of one doubtful of a stranger's identity or purpose. Whether the little priest's coat and creed touched some southern memories of confession, or whether she fancied he knew more than he did, she said to him in a low voice as to a fellow plotter, "He is right enough in one way, your friend. He says it would be hard to pick out the good and bad brothers. Oh, it would be hard, it would be mighty hard, to pick out the good one."

"I don't understand you," said Father Brown, and began to move away.

The woman took a step nearer to him, with thunderous brows and a sort of savage stoop, like a bull lowering his horns.

"There isn't a good one," she hissed. "There was badness enough in the captain taking all that money, but I don't think there was much goodness in the prince giving it. The captain's not the only one with something against him."

A light dawned on the cleric's averted face, and his mouth formed silently the word "blackmail." Even as he did so the woman turned an abrupt white face over her shoulder and almost fell. The door had opened soundlessly and the pale Paul stood like a ghost in the doorway. By the weird trick of the reflecting walls, it seemed as if five Pauls had entered by five doors simultaneously.

"His Highness," he said, "has just arrived."

In the same flash the figure of a man had passed outside the first window, crossing the sunlit pane like a lighted stage. An instant later he passed at the second window and the many mirrors repainted in successive frames the same eagle profile and marching figure. He was erect and alert, but his hair was white and his complexion of an odd ivory yellow. He had that short, curved Roman nose which generally goes with long, lean cheeks and chin, but these were partly masked by moustache and imperial. The moustache was much darker than the beard, giving an effect slightly theatrical, and he was dressed up to the same dashing part, having a white top hat, an orchid in his coat, a yellow waistcoat and yellow gloves which he flapped and swung as he walked. When he came round to the front door they heard the stiff Paul open it, and heard the new arrival say cheerfully, "Well, you see I have come."

The stiff Mr. Paul bowed and answered in his inaudible manner; for a few minutes their conversation could not be heard. Then the butler said, "Everything is at your disposal;" and the glove-flapping Prince Saradine came gaily into the room to greet them. They beheld once more that spectral scene--five princes entering a room with five doors.

The prince put the white hat and yellow gloves on the table and offered his hand quite cordially.

“Delighted to see you here, Mr. Flambeau,” he said. “Knowing you very well by reputation, if that’s not an indiscreet remark.”

“Not at all,” answered Flambeau, laughing. “I am not sensitive. Very few reputations are gained by unsullied virtue.”

The prince flashed a sharp look at him to see if the retort had any personal point; then he laughed also and offered chairs to everyone, including himself.

“Pleasant little place, this, I think,” he said with a detached air. “Not much to do, I fear; but the fishing is really good.”

The priest, who was staring at him with the grave stare of a baby, was haunted by some fancy that escaped definition. He looked at the grey, carefully curled hair, yellow white visage, and slim, somewhat foppish figure. These were not unnatural, though perhaps a shade prononcé, like the outfit of a figure behind the footlights. The nameless interest lay in something else, in the very framework of the face; Brown was tormented with a half memory of having seen it somewhere before. The man looked like some old friend of his dressed up. Then he suddenly remembered the mirrors, and put his fancy down to some psychological effect of that multiplication of human masks.

Prince Saradine distributed his social attentions between his guests with great gaiety and tact. Finding the detective of a sporting turn and eager to employ his holiday, he guided Flambeau and Flambeau’s boat down to the best fishing spot in the stream, and was back in his own canoe in twenty minutes to join Father Brown in the library and plunge equally politely into the priest’s more philosophic pleasures. He seemed to know a great deal both about the fishing and the books, though of these not the most edifying; he spoke five or six languages, though chiefly the slang of each. He had evidently lived in varied cities and very motley societies, for some of his cheerfullest stories were about gambling hells and opium dens, Australian bushrangers or Italian brigands. Father Brown knew that the once-celebrated Saradine had spent his last few years in almost ceaseless travel, but he had not guessed that the travels were so disreputable or so amusing.

Indeed, with all his dignity of a man of the world, Prince Saradine radiated to such sensitive observers as the priest, a certain atmosphere of the restless and even the unreliable. His face was fastidious, but his eye was wild; he had little nervous tricks, like a man shaken by drink or drugs, and he neither had, nor professed to have, his hand on the helm of household affairs. All these were left to the two old servants, especially to the butler, who was plainly the central pillar

of the house. Mr. Paul, indeed, was not so much a butler as a sort of steward or, even, chamberlain; he dined privately, but with almost as much pomp as his master; he was feared by all the servants; and he consulted with the prince decorously, but somewhat unbendingly--rather as if he were the prince's solicitor. The sombre housekeeper was a mere shadow in comparison; indeed, she seemed to efface herself and wait only on the butler, and Brown heard no more of those volcanic whispers which had half told him of the younger brother who blackmailed the elder. Whether the prince was really being thus bled by the absent captain, he could not be certain, but there was something insecure and secretive about Saradine that made the tale by no means incredible.

When they went once more into the long hall with the windows and the mirrors, yellow evening was dropping over the waters and the willowy banks; and a bittern sounded in the distance like an elf upon his dwarfish drum. The same singular sentiment of some sad and evil fairyland crossed the priest's mind again like a little grey cloud. "I wish Flambeau were back," he muttered.

"Do you believe in doom?" asked the restless Prince Saradine suddenly.

"No," answered his guest. "I believe in Doomsday."

The prince turned from the window and stared at him in a singular manner, his face in shadow against the sunset. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that we here are on the wrong side of the tapestry," answered Father Brown. "The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; they mean something somewhere else. Somewhere else retribution will come on the real offender. Here it often seems to fall on the wrong person."

The prince made an inexplicable noise like an animal; in his shadowed face the eyes were shining queerly. A new and shrewd thought exploded silently in the other's mind. Was there another meaning in Saradine's blend of brilliancy and abruptness? Was the prince--Was he perfectly sane? He was repeating, "The wrong person--the wrong person," many more times than was natural in a social exclamation.

Then Father Brown awoke tardily to a second truth. In the mirrors before him he could see the silent door standing open, and the silent Mr. Paul standing in it, with his usual pallid impassiveness.

"I thought it better to announce at once," he said, with the same stiff respectfulness as of an old family lawyer, "a boat rowed by six men has come to the landing-stage, and there's a gentleman sitting in the stern."

"A boat!" repeated the prince; "a gentleman?" and he rose to his feet.

There was a startled silence punctuated only by the odd noise of the bird in the sedge; and then, before anyone could speak again, a new face and figure passed in profile round the three sunlit windows, as the prince had passed an hour or two before. But except for the accident that both outlines were aquiline, they had little in common. Instead of the new white topper of Saradine, was a black one of antiquated or foreign shape; under it was a young and very solemn face, clean shaven, blue about its resolute chin, and carrying a faint suggestion of the young Napoleon. The association was assisted by something old and odd about the whole get-up, as of a man who had never troubled to change the fashions of his fathers. He had a shabby blue frock coat, a red, soldierly looking waistcoat, and a kind of coarse white trousers common among the early Victorians, but strangely incongruous today. From all this old clothes-shop his olive face stood out strangely young and monstrously sincere.

“The deuce!” said Prince Saradine, and clapping on his white hat he went to the front door himself, flinging it open on the sunset garden.

By that time the new-comer and his followers were drawn up on the lawn like a small stage army. The six boatmen had pulled the boat well up on shore, and were guarding it almost menacingly, holding their oars erect like spears. They were swarthy men, and some of them wore earrings. But one of them stood forward beside the olive-faced young man in the red waistcoat, and carried a large black case of unfamiliar form.

“Your name,” said the young man, “is Saradine?”

Saradine assented rather negligently.

The new-comer had dull, dog-like brown eyes, as different as possible from the restless and glittering grey eyes of the prince. But once again Father Brown was tortured with a sense of having seen somewhere a replica of the face; and once again he remembered the repetitions of the glass-panelled room, and put down the coincidence to that. “Confound this crystal palace!” he muttered. “One sees everything too many times. It’s like a dream.”

“If you are Prince Saradine,” said the young man, “I may tell you that my name is Antonelli.”

“Antonelli,” repeated the prince languidly. “Somehow I remember the name.”

“Permit me to present myself,” said the young Italian.

With his left hand he politely took off his old-fashioned top-hat; with his right he caught Prince Saradine so ringing a crack across the

face that the white top hat rolled down the steps and one of the blue flower-pots rocked upon its pedestal.

The prince, whatever he was, was evidently not a coward; he sprang at his enemy's throat and almost bore him backwards to the grass. But his enemy extricated himself with a singularly inappropriate air of hurried politeness.

"That is all right," he said, panting and in halting English. "I have insulted. I will give satisfaction. Marco, open the case."

The man beside him with the earrings and the big black case proceeded to unlock it. He took out of it two long Italian rapiers, with splendid steel hilts and blades, which he planted point downwards in the lawn. The strange young man standing facing the entrance with his yellow and vindictive face, the two swords standing up in the turf like two crosses in a cemetery, and the line of the ranked towers behind, gave it all an odd appearance of being some barbaric court of justice. But everything else was unchanged, so sudden had been the interruption. The sunset gold still glowed on the lawn, and the bittern still boomed as announcing some small but dreadful destiny.

"Prince Saradine," said the man called Antonelli, "when I was an infant in the cradle you killed my father and stole my mother; my father was the more fortunate. You did not kill him fairly, as I am going to kill you. You and my wicked mother took him driving to a lonely pass in Sicily, flung him down a cliff, and went on your way. I could imitate you if I chose, but imitating you is too vile. I have followed you all over the world, and you have always fled from me. But this is the end of the world--and of you. I have you now, and I give you the chance you never gave my father. Choose one of those swords."

Prince Saradine, with contracted brows, seemed to hesitate a moment, but his ears were still singing with the blow, and he sprang forward and snatched at one of the hilts. Father Brown had also sprung forward, striving to compose the dispute; but he soon found his personal presence made matters worse. Saradine was a French freemason and a fierce atheist, and a priest moved him by the law of contraries. And for the other man neither priest nor layman moved him at all. This young man with the Bonaparte face and the brown eyes was something far sterner than a puritan--a pagan. He was a simple slayer from the morning of the earth; a man of the stone age--a man of stone.

One hope remained, the summoning of the household; and Father Brown ran back into the house. He found, however, that all the under servants had been given a holiday ashore by the autocrat Paul, and that only the sombre Mrs. Anthony moved uneasily about the long rooms. But the moment she turned a ghastly face upon him, he resolved one of the riddles of the house of mirrors. The heavy brown eyes of Antonelli were the heavy

brown eyes of Mrs. Anthony; and in a flash he saw half the story.

“Your son is outside,” he said without wasting words; “either he or the prince will be killed. Where is Mr. Paul?”

“He is at the landing-stage,” said the woman faintly. “He is--he is--signalling for help.”

“Mrs. Anthony,” said Father Brown seriously, “there is no time for nonsense. My friend has his boat down the river fishing. Your son’s boat is guarded by your son’s men. There is only this one canoe; what is Mr. Paul doing with it?”

“Santa Maria! I do not know,” she said; and swooned all her length on the matted floor.

Father Brown lifted her to a sofa, flung a pot of water over her, shouted for help, and then rushed down to the landing-stage of the little island. But the canoe was already in mid-stream, and old Paul was pulling and pushing it up the river with an energy incredible at his years.

“I will save my master,” he cried, his eyes blazing maniacally. “I will save him yet!”

Father Brown could do nothing but gaze after the boat as it struggled up-stream and pray that the old man might waken the little town in time.

“A duel is bad enough,” he muttered, rubbing up his rough dust-coloured hair, “but there’s something wrong about this duel, even as a duel. I feel it in my bones. But what can it be?”

As he stood staring at the water, a wavering mirror of sunset, he heard from the other end of the island garden a small but unmistakable sound--the cold concussion of steel. He turned his head.

Away on the farthest cape or headland of the long islet, on a strip of turf beyond the last rank of roses, the duellists had already crossed swords. Evening above them was a dome of virgin gold, and, distant as they were, every detail was picked out. They had cast off their coats, but the yellow waistcoat and white hair of Saradine, the red waistcoat and white trousers of Antonelli, glittered in the level light like the colours of the dancing clockwork dolls. The two swords sparkled from point to pommel like two diamond pins. There was something frightful in the two figures appearing so little and so gay. They looked like two butterflies trying to pin each other to a cork.

Father Brown ran as hard as he could, his little legs going like a wheel. But when he came to the field of combat he found he was born too

late and too early--too late to stop the strife, under the shadow of the grim Sicilians leaning on their oars, and too early to anticipate any disastrous issue of it. For the two men were singularly well matched, the prince using his skill with a sort of cynical confidence, the Sicilian using his with a murderous care. Few finer fencing matches can ever have been seen in crowded amphitheatres than that which tinkled and sparkled on that forgotten island in the reedy river. The dizzy fight was balanced so long that hope began to revive in the protesting priest; by all common probability Paul must soon come back with the police. It would be some comfort even if Flambeau came back from his fishing, for Flambeau, physically speaking, was worth four other men. But there was no sign of Flambeau, and, what was much queerer, no sign of Paul or the police. No other raft or stick was left to float on; in that lost island in that vast nameless pool, they were cut off as on a rock in the Pacific.

Almost as he had the thought the ringing of the rapiers quickened to a rattle, the prince's arms flew up, and the point shot out behind between his shoulder-blades. He went over with a great whirling movement, almost like one throwing the half of a boy's cart-wheel. The sword flew from his hand like a shooting star, and dived into the distant river. And he himself sank with so earth-shaking a subsidence that he broke a big rose-tree with his body and shook up into the sky a cloud of red earth--like the smoke of some heathen sacrifice. The Sicilian had made blood-offering to the ghost of his father.

The priest was instantly on his knees by the corpse; but only to make too sure that it was a corpse. As he was still trying some last hopeless tests he heard for the first time voices from farther up the river, and saw a police boat shoot up to the landing-stage, with constables and other important people, including the excited Paul. The little priest rose with a distinctly dubious grimace.

"Now, why on earth," he muttered, "why on earth couldn't he have come before?"

Some seven minutes later the island was occupied by an invasion of townsfolk and police, and the latter had put their hands on the victorious duellist, ritually reminding him that anything he said might be used against him.

"I shall not say anything," said the monomaniac, with a wonderful and peaceful face. "I shall never say anything more. I am very happy, and I only want to be hanged."

Then he shut his mouth as they led him away, and it is the strange but certain truth that he never opened it again in this world, except to say "Guilty" at his trial.

Father Brown had stared at the suddenly crowded garden, the arrest of the man of blood, the carrying away of the corpse after its examination by the doctor, rather as one watches the break-up of some ugly dream; he was motionless, like a man in a nightmare. He gave his name and address as a witness, but declined their offer of a boat to the shore, and remained alone in the island garden, gazing at the broken rose bush and the whole green theatre of that swift and inexplicable tragedy. The light died along the river; mist rose in the marshy banks; a few belated birds flitted fitfully across.

Stuck stubbornly in his sub-consciousness (which was an unusually lively one) was an unspeakable certainty that there was something still unexplained. This sense that had clung to him all day could not be fully explained by his fancy about "looking-glass land." Somehow he had not seen the real story, but some game or masque. And yet people do not get hanged or run through the body for the sake of a charade.

As he sat on the steps of the landing-stage ruminating he grew conscious of the tall, dark streak of a sail coming silently down the shining river, and sprang to his feet with such a backrush of feeling that he almost wept.

"Flambeau!" he cried, and shook his friend by both hands again and again, much to the astonishment of that sportsman, as he came on shore with his fishing tackle. "Flambeau," he said, "so you're not killed?"

"Killed!" repeated the angler in great astonishment. "And why should I be killed?"

"Oh, because nearly everybody else is," said his companion rather wildly. "Saradine got murdered, and Antonelli wants to be hanged, and his mother's fainted, and I, for one, don't know whether I'm in this world or the next. But, thank God, you're in the same one." And he took the bewildered Flambeau's arm.

As they turned from the landing-stage they came under the eaves of the low bamboo house, and looked in through one of the windows, as they had done on their first arrival. They beheld a lamp-lit interior well calculated to arrest their eyes. The table in the long dining-room had been laid for dinner when Saradine's destroyer had fallen like a stormbolt on the island. And the dinner was now in placid progress, for Mrs. Anthony sat somewhat sullenly at the foot of the table, while at the head of it was Mr. Paul, the major domo, eating and drinking of the best, his bleared, bluish eyes standing queerly out of his face, his gaunt countenance inscrutable, but by no means devoid of satisfaction.

With a gesture of powerful impatience, Flambeau rattled at the window, wrenched it open, and put an indignant head into the lamp-lit room.

“Well,” he cried. “I can understand you may need some refreshment, but really to steal your master’s dinner while he lies murdered in the garden--”

“I have stolen a great many things in a long and pleasant life,” replied the strange old gentleman placidly; “this dinner is one of the few things I have not stolen. This dinner and this house and garden happen to belong to me.”

A thought flashed across Flambeau’s face. “You mean to say,” he began, “that the will of Prince Saradine--”

“I am Prince Saradine,” said the old man, munching a salted almond.

Father Brown, who was looking at the birds outside, jumped as if he were shot, and put in at the window a pale face like a turnip.

“You are what?” he repeated in a shrill voice.

“Paul, Prince Saradine, A vos ordres,” said the venerable person politely, lifting a glass of sherry. “I live here very quietly, being a domestic kind of fellow; and for the sake of modesty I am called Mr. Paul, to distinguish me from my unfortunate brother Mr. Stephen. He died, I hear, recently--in the garden. Of course, it is not my fault if enemies pursue him to this place. It is owing to the regrettable irregularity of his life. He was not a domestic character.”

He relapsed into silence, and continued to gaze at the opposite wall just above the bowed and sombre head of the woman. They saw plainly the family likeness that had haunted them in the dead man. Then his old shoulders began to heave and shake a little, as if he were choking, but his face did not alter.

“My God!” cried Flambeau after a pause, “he’s laughing!”

“Come away,” said Father Brown, who was quite white. “Come away from this house of hell. Let us get into an honest boat again.”

Night had sunk on rushes and river by the time they had pushed off from the island, and they went down-stream in the dark, warming themselves with two big cigars that glowed like crimson ships’ lanterns. Father Brown took his cigar out of his mouth and said:

“I suppose you can guess the whole story now? After all, it’s a primitive story. A man had two enemies. He was a wise man. And so he discovered that two enemies are better than one.”

“I do not follow that,” answered Flambeau.

“Oh, it’s really simple,” rejoined his friend. “Simple, though anything but innocent. Both the Saradines were scamps, but the prince, the elder, was the sort of scamp that gets to the top, and the younger, the captain, was the sort that sinks to the bottom. This squalid officer fell from beggar to blackmailer, and one ugly day he got his hold upon his brother, the prince. Obviously it was for no light matter, for Prince Paul Saradine was frankly ‘fast,’ and had no reputation to lose as to the mere sins of society. In plain fact, it was a hanging matter, and Stephen literally had a rope round his brother’s neck. He had somehow discovered the truth about the Sicilian affair, and could prove that Paul murdered old Antonelli in the mountains. The captain raked in the hush money heavily for ten years, until even the prince’s splendid fortune began to look a little foolish.

“But Prince Saradine bore another burden besides his blood-sucking brother. He knew that the son of Antonelli, a mere child at the time of the murder, had been trained in savage Sicilian loyalty, and lived only to avenge his father, not with the gibbet (for he lacked Stephen’s legal proof), but with the old weapons of vendetta. The boy had practised arms with a deadly perfection, and about the time that he was old enough to use them Prince Saradine began, as the society papers said, to travel. The fact is that he began to flee for his life, passing from place to place like a hunted criminal; but with one relentless man upon his trail. That was Prince Paul’s position, and by no means a pretty one. The more money he spent on eluding Antonelli the less he had to silence Stephen. The more he gave to silence Stephen the less chance there was of finally escaping Antonelli. Then it was that he showed himself a great man--a genius like Napoleon.

“Instead of resisting his two antagonists, he surrendered suddenly to both of them. He gave way like a Japanese wrestler, and his foes fell prostrate before him. He gave up the race round the world, and he gave up his address to young Antonelli; then he gave up everything to his brother. He sent Stephen money enough for smart clothes and easy travel, with a letter saying roughly: ‘This is all I have left. You have cleaned me out. I still have a little house in Norfolk, with servants and a cellar, and if you want more from me you must take that. Come and take possession if you like, and I will live there quietly as your friend or agent or anything.’ He knew that the Sicilian had never seen the Saradine brothers save, perhaps, in pictures; he knew they were somewhat alike, both having grey, pointed beards. Then he shaved his own face and waited. The trap worked. The unhappy captain, in his new clothes, entered the house in triumph as a prince, and walked upon the Sicilian’s sword.

“There was one hitch, and it is to the honour of human nature. Evil spirits like Saradine often blunder by never expecting the virtues of mankind. He took it for granted that the Italian’s blow, when it came, would be dark, violent and nameless, like the blow it avenged; that the

victim would be knifed at night, or shot from behind a hedge, and so die without speech. It was a bad minute for Prince Paul when Antonelli's chivalry proposed a formal duel, with all its possible explanations. It was then that I found him putting off in his boat with wild eyes. He was fleeing, bareheaded, in an open boat before Antonelli should learn who he was.

"But, however agitated, he was not hopeless. He knew the adventurer and he knew the fanatic. It was quite probable that Stephen, the adventurer, would hold his tongue, through his mere histrionic pleasure in playing a part, his lust for clinging to his new cosy quarters, his rascal's trust in luck, and his fine fencing. It was certain that Antonelli, the fanatic, would hold his tongue, and be hanged without telling tales of his family. Paul hung about on the river till he knew the fight was over. Then he roused the town, brought the police, saw his two vanquished enemies taken away forever, and sat down smiling to his dinner."

"Laughing, God help us!" said Flambeau with a strong shudder. "Do they get such ideas from Satan?"

"He got that idea from you," answered the priest.

"God forbid!" ejaculated Flambeau. "From me! What do you mean!"

The priest pulled a visiting-card from his pocket and held it up in the faint glow of his cigar; it was scrawled with green ink.

"Don't you remember his original invitation to you?" he asked, "and the compliment to your criminal exploit? 'That trick of yours,' he says, 'of getting one detective to arrest the other'? He has just copied your trick. With an enemy on each side of him, he slipped swiftly out of the way and let them collide and kill each other."

Flambeau tore Prince Saradine's card from the priest's hands and rent it savagely in small pieces.

"There's the last of that old skull and crossbones," he said as he scattered the pieces upon the dark and disappearing waves of the stream; "but I should think it would poison the fishes."

The last gleam of white card and green ink was drowned and darkened; a faint and vibrant colour as of morning changed the sky, and the moon behind the grasses grew paler. They drifted in silence.

"Father," said Flambeau suddenly, "do you think it was all a dream?"

The priest shook his head, whether in dissent or agnosticism, but remained mute. A smell of hawthorn and of orchards came to them through

the darkness, telling them that a wind was awake; the next moment it swayed their little boat and swelled their sail, and carried them onward down the winding river to happier places and the homes of harmless men.

The Project Gutenberg EBook of

foundling

on

venus

by ... John & Dorothy de Courcy

Venus was the most miserable planet in the system, peopled by miserable excuses for human beings. And somewhere among this conglomeration of boiling protoplasm there was a being unlike the others, a being who walked and talked like the others but who was different--and afraid the difference would be discovered. You'll remember this short story.

The foundling could not have been more than three years old. Yet he held a secret that was destined to bring joy to many unhappy people.

Unlike Gaul, the north continent of Venus is divided into _four_ parts. No Caesar has set foot here either, nor shall one--for the dank, stinging, caustic air swallows up the lives of men and only Venus may say, _I conquered_.

This is colonized Venus, where one may walk without the threat of sudden death--except from other men--the most bitterly fought for, the dearest, bloodiest, most worthless land in the solar system.

Separated by men into East and West at the center of the Twilight Zone, the division across the continent is the irregular, jagged line of Mud River, springing from the Great Serpent Range.

The African Republic holds one quarter which the Negroes exploit as best they can, encumbered by filter masks and protective clothing.

The Asians still actually try to colonize their quarter, while the Venusian primitives neither help nor hinder the bitter game of power-politics, secret murder, and misery--most of all, misery.

The men from Mars understand this better, for their quarter is a penal colony. Sleepy-eyed, phlegmatic Martians, self-condemned for minute

violations of their incredible and complex mores--without guards save themselves--will return to the subterranean cities, complex philosophies, and cool, dry air of Mars when they have declared their own sentences to be at an end.

Meanwhile, they labor to extract the wealth of Venus without the bitterness and hate, without the savagery and fear of their neighbors. Hence, they are regarded by all with the greatest suspicion.

The Federated States, after their fashion, plunder the land and send screaming ships to North America laden with booty and with men grown suddenly rich--and with men who will never care for riches or anything else again. These are the fortunate dead. The rest are received into the sloppy breast of Venus where even a tombstone or marker is swallowed in a few, short weeks. And they die quickly on Venus, and often.

From the arbitrary point where the four territories met, New Reno flung its sprawling, dirty carcass over the muddy soil and roared and hooted endlessly, laughed with the rough boisterousness of miners and spacemen, rang with the brittle, brassy laughter of women following a trade older than New Reno. It clanged and shouted and bellowed so loudly that quiet sobbing was never heard.

But a strange sound hung in the air, the crying of a child. A tiny child, a boy, he sat begrimed by mud at the edge of the street where an occasional ground car flung fresh contamination on his small form until he became almost indistinguishable from the muddy street. His whimpering changed to prolonged wailing sobs. He didn't turn to look at any of the giant passers-by nor did they even notice him.

But finally one passer-by stopped. She was young and probably from the Federated States. She was not painted nor was she well-dressed. She had nothing to distinguish her, except that she stopped.

"Oh, my!" she breathed, bending over the tiny form. "You poor thing. Where's your mama?"

The little figure rubbed its face, looked at her blankly and heaved a long, shuddering sigh.

"I can't leave you sitting here in the mud!" She pulled out a handkerchief and tried to wipe away some of the mud and then helped him up. His clothes were rags, his feet bare. She took him by the hand and as they walked along she talked to him. But he seemed not to hear.

Soon they reached the dirty, plastic front of the Elite Cafe. Once through the double portals, she pulled the respirator from her face. The air inside was dirty and smelly but it was breathable. People were eating noisily, boisterously, with all the lusty, unclean young life

that was Venus. They clamored, banged and threw things for no reason other than to throw them.

She guided the little one past the tables filled with people and into the kitchen. The door closed with a bang, shutting out much of the noise from the big room. Gingerly she sat him down on a stool, and with detergent and water she began removing the mud. His eyes were horribly red-rimmed.

"It's a wonder you didn't die out there," she murmured. "Poor little thing!"

"Hey! Are you going to work or aren't you, Jane?" a voice boomed.

A large ruddy man in white had entered the kitchen and he stood frowning at the girl. Women weren't rare on Venus, and she was only a waitress ...

"What in the blue blazes is that!" He pointed to the child.

"He was outside," the girl explained, "sitting in the street. He didn't have a respirator."

The ruddy man scowled at the boy speculatively. "His lungs all right?"

"He isn't coughing much," she replied.

"But what are you going to do with him?" the man asked Jane.

"I don't know," she said. "Something. Tell the Patrol about him, I guess."

The beefy man hesitated. "It's been a long time since I've seen a kid this young on Venus. They always ship 'em home. Could have been dumped. Maybe his parents left him on purpose."

The girl flinched.

He grunted disgustedly, his face mirroring his thoughts. _Stringy hair ... plain face ... and soft as Venus slime clear through!_ He shrugged. "Anyway, he's got to eat." He looked at the small figure. "Want to eat, kid? Would you like a glass of milk?" He opened a refrigerator, took out a plastic bottle and poured milk in a glass.

Chubby hands reached out for the glass.

"There, that's better," the cook said. "Pete will see that you get fed all right." He turned to the girl. "Could he belong to someone around here?"

Jane shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen him before."

"Well, he can stay in the kitchen while you work the shift. I'll watch him."

She nodded, took an apron down from a hook and tied it around her waist. Then she patted the sober-faced youngster on his tousled head and left.

The beefy man studied the boy. "I think I'll put you over there," he said. He lifted him, stool and all, and carried him across the kitchen. "You can watch through that panel. See? That's Jane in there. She'll come back and forth, pass right by here. Is that all right?"

The little one nodded.

"Oh?" Pete raised his eyebrows. "So you do know what I'm saying." He watched the child for a few minutes, then turned his attention to the range. The rush hour was on and he soon forgot the little boy on the stool ...

Whenever possible during the lunch-hour rush, Jane stopped to smile and talk to the child. Once she asked, "Don't you know where your mama and daddy are?"

He just stared at her, unblinking, his big eyes soft and sad-looking.

The girl studied him for a moment, then she picked up a cookie and gave it to him. "Can you tell me your name?" she asked hopefully.

His lips parted. Cookie crumbs fell off his chin and from the corners of his mouth, but he spoke no words.

She sighed, turned, and went out to the clattering throng with laden plates of food.

For a while Jane was so busy she almost forgot the young one. But finally people began to linger more over their food, the clinking of dishes grew quieter and Pete took time for a cup of coffee. His sweating face was haggard. He stared sullenly at the little boy and shook his head.

"Shouldn't be such things as kids," he muttered. "Nothing but a pain in the neck!"

Jane came through the door. "It gets worse all the time," she groaned. She turned to the little boy. "Did you have something to eat?"

"I didn't know what to fix for him," Pete said. "How about some beef stew? Do you think he'd go for that?"

Jane hesitated. "I--I don't know. Try it."

Pete ladled up a bowl of steaming stew. Jane took it and put it on the table. She took a bit on a spoon, blew on it, then held it out. The child opened his mouth. She smiled and slowly fed him the stew.

"How old do you think he is?" Pete asked.

The girl hesitated, opened her mouth, but said nothing.

"About two and a half, I'd guess," Pete answered himself. "Maybe three." Jane nodded and he turned back to cleaning the stove.

"Don't you want some more stew?" Jane asked as she offered the small one another spoonful.

The little mouth didn't open.

"Guess you've had enough," she said, smiling.

Pete glanced up. "Why don't you leave now, Jane. You're going to have to see the Patrol about that kid. I can take care of things here."

She stood thinking for a moment. "Can I use an extra respirator?"

"You can't take him out without one!" Pete replied. He opened a locker and pulled out a transparent facepiece. "I think this'll tighten down enough to fit his face."

She took it and walked over to the youngster. His large eyes had followed all her movements and he drew back slightly as she held out the respirator. "It won't hurt," she coaxed. "You have to wear it. The air outside stings."

The little face remained steady but the eyes were fearful as Jane slid the transparent mask over his head and tightened the elastic. It pulsed slightly with his breathing.

"Better wrap him in this," Pete suggested, pulling a duroplast jacket out of the locker. "Air's tough on skin."

The girl nodded, pulling on her own respirator. She stepped quickly into her duroplast suit and tied it. "Thanks a lot, Pete," she said, her voice slightly muffled. "See you tomorrow."

Pete grunted as he watched her wrap the tiny form in the jacket, lift it gently in her arms, then push through the door.

The girl walked swiftly up the street. It was quieter now, but in a short time the noise and stench and garishness of New Reno would begin rising to another cacophonous climax.

The strange pair reached a wretched metal structure with an askew sign reading, "El Grande Hotel." Jane hurried through the double portals, the swish of air flapping her outer garments as the air conditioning unit fought savagely to keep out the rival atmosphere of the planet.

There was no one at the desk and no one in the lobby. It was a forlorn place, musty and damp. Venus humidity seemed to eat through everything, even metal, leaving it limp, faded, and stinking.

She hesitated, looked at the visiphone, then impulsively pulled a chair over out of the line of sight of the viewing plate and gently set the little boy on it. She pulled the respirator from her face, pressed the button under the blank visiphone disk. The plate lit up and hummed faintly.

"Patrol Office," Jane said.

There was a click and a middle-aged, square-faced man with blue-coated shoulders appeared. "Patrol Office," he repeated.

"This is Jane Grant. I work at the Elite Cafe. Has anyone lost a little boy?"

The patrolman's eyebrows raised slightly. "Little boy? Did you find one?"

"Well--I--I saw one earlier this evening," she faltered. "He was sitting at the edge of the street and I took him into the cafe and fed him."

"Well, there aren't many children in town," he replied. "Let's see." He glanced at a record sheet. "No, none's reported missing. He with you now?"

"Ah--no."

He shook his head again, still looking downward. He said slowly, "His parents must have found him. If he was wandering we'd have picked him up. There is a family that live around there who have a ten-year-old kid who wanders off once in a while. Blond, stutters a little. Was it him?"

"Well, I--" she began. She paused, said firmly, "No."

"Well, we don't have any reports on lost children. Haven't had for some time. If the boy was lost his parents must have found him. Thank you for calling." He broke the connection.

Jane stood staring at the blank plate. No one had reported a little boy missing. In all the maddening confusion that was New Reno, no one had missed a little boy.

She looked at the small bundle, walked over and slipped off his respirator. "I should have told the truth," she murmured to him softly. "But you're so tiny and helpless. Poor little thing!"

He looked up at her, then around the lobby, his brown eyes resting on first one object, then another. His little chin began to quiver.

The girl picked him up and stroked his hair. "Don't cry," she soothed. "Everything's going to be all right."

She walked down a hall, fumbling inside her coveralls for a key. At the end of the hall she stopped, unlocked a door, and carried him inside. As an afterthought she locked the door, still holding the small bundle in her arms. Then she placed him on a bed, removed the jacket and threw it on a chair.

"I don't know why I should go to all this trouble," she said, removing her protective coveralls. "I'll probably get picked up by the Patrol. But _somebody's_ got to look after you."

She sat down beside him. "Aren't you even a bit sleepy?"

He smiled a little.

"Maybe now you can tell me your name," she said. "Don't you know your name?"

His expression didn't change.

She pointed to herself. "Jane." Then she hesitated, looked downward for a moment. "Jana, I was called before I came here."

The little face looked up at her. The small mouth opened. "Jana." It was half whisper, half whistle.

"That's right," she replied, stroking his hair. "My, but your throat must be sore. I hope you won't be sick from breathing too much of that awful air."

She regarded him quizzically. "You know, I've never seen many little boys. I don't quite know how to treat one. But I know you should get some sleep."

She smiled and reached over to take off the rags. He pulled away

suddenly.

"Don't be afraid," she said reassuringly. "I wouldn't hurt you."

He clutched the little ragged shirt tightly.

"Don't be afraid," she repeated soothingly. "I'll tell you what. You lie down and I'll put this blanket over you," she said, rising. "Will that be all right?"

She laid him down and covered the small form with a blanket. He lay there watching her with his large eyes.

"You don't look very sleepy," she said. "Perhaps I had better turn the light down." She did so, slowly, so as not to alarm him. But he was silent, watchful, never taking his eyes from her.

She smiled and sat down next to him. "Now I'll tell you a story and then you must go to sleep," she said softly.

He smiled--just a little smile--and she was pleased.

"Fine," she cried. "Well--once upon a time there was a beautiful planet, not at all like this one. There were lovely flowers and cool-running streams and it only rained once in a while. You'd like it there for it's a very nice place. But there were people there who liked to travel--to see strange places and new things, and one day they left in a great big ship."

She paused again, frowning in thought. "Well, they traveled a long, long way and saw many things. Then one day something went wrong."

Her voice was low and soft. It had the quality of a dream, the texture of a zephyr, but the little boy was still wide awake.

"Something went very, very wrong and they tried to land so they could fix it. But when they tried to land they found they couldn't--and they fell and just barely managed to save themselves. The big, beautiful ship was all broken. Well, since they couldn't fix the ship at all now, they set out on foot to find out where they were and to see if they could get help. Then they found that they were in a land of great big giants, and the people were very fierce."

The little boy's dark eyes were watching her intently but she went on, hardly noticing.

"So they went back to the broken ship and tried to decide what to do. They couldn't get in touch with their home because the radio part of the ship was all broken up. And the giants were horrible and wanted

everything for themselves and were cruel and mean and probably would have hurt the poor ship-wrecked people if they had known they were there.

"So--do you know what they did? They got some things from the ship and they went and built a giant. And they put little motors inside and things to make it run and talk so that the giants wouldn't be able to tell that it wasn't another giant just like themselves."

She paused, straightening slightly.

"And then they made a space inside the giant where somebody could sit and run this big giant and talk and move around--and the giants wouldn't ever know that she was there. They made it a _she_. In fact, she was the only person who could do it because she could learn to talk all sorts of languages--that's what she could do best. So she went out in the giant suit and mingled with the giants and worked just like they did.

"But every once in a while she'd go back to the others, bringing them things they needed. And she would bring back news. That was their only hope--news of a ship which might be looking for them, which might take them home--"

She broke off. "I wonder what the end of the story will be?" she murmured.

For some time she had not been using English. She had been speaking in a soft, fluid language unlike anything ever heard on Venus. But now she had stopped speaking entirely.

After a slight pause--another voice spoke--in the same melodious, alien tongue! It said, "I think I know the end of the story. I think someone has come for you poor people and is going to take you home."

She gasped--for she realized it had not been her voice. Her artificial eyes watched, stunned, as the little boy began peeling off a skin-tight, flexible baby-faced mask, revealing underneath the face of a little man.

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from _Fantastic Universe_ March 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS,

by Leonard H. Nasob

from The Internet Archive scan of *Adventure*, 10/30/23

(This file has been edited to correct major scan typos)

"What time is it now?"

"Four-thirty; half an hour more."

"How come we couldn't sleep
that extra half-hour? How come they
drag us up in here in the mud all night,
and then we gotta sit in the rain all this
time? Why couldn't we sleep back in
them woods?"

"How come yuh askin' me? I dunno;
I ain't no officer."

The two soldiers hunched silently into
the collars of their slickers. The rain fell
in sheets, and the water in the ditch in
which they were sitting was half-way
to their knees. They had started at
dusk, from some little town they had never
seen, before the trucks had unloaded them
there, and had marched all night through
numbers of other towns. Nobody ever
knew the names of those places. They were
just towns, and the outfit always marched
at night.

Finally, when the road began to get
rough and full of pits and holes, they turned
off into some woods. They emerged from
these woods on to yet another road and
halted in the ditch. No need to tell them
this was the end of the hike. Those rockets
going up and the faint rattle at intervals
told them they were close to the front line.
This was a company of infantry, the ditch
was the jumping-off place, five A. If. the
zero hour, and these men knew that it
would be the last hour for many of them.

"Where's all this barrage we been hearin' so much about?" said one of the men.

Perhaps it would be well to introduce these two. The one with his steel helmet on over his overseas cap is Costello, and the man beside him is named Ira Hall, both privates of infantry, A. E. F.

"Well," said Hall, "if you listen hard, you can hear somethin' whistlin' by overhead, but it don't seem to bother them Huns a whole lot. They keep shootin' lights up just the same."

There was silence after this while the waiting troops bowed their heads to the driving rain. Then suddenly a tremendous crashing and banging under their very noses. Whistles began to blow.

"Heads up, men; heads up;" then, "Let's go!"

And they scrambled out of the ditch. Costello and Hall moved along side by side, their hearts hammering. On all sides they could hear men sloshing through the mud. It was fairly light, but the rain on the eye-pieces of their gas-masks made seeing difficult. Their own barrage proceeded them — thick, acrid stuff like dirty wool.

The men began to breathe more easily they were still alive, and the German trenches must be pretty near by now. Maybe the Jerries were all dead. Then men began to appear, coming toward them through the smoke. Hall gripped his rifle, and then he saw that the oncoming figures all had their hands raised, with the palms open.

The smoke grew thicker, and the prisoners appeared in greater numbers. There was no one with them, and no one paid them any attention, except perhaps to motion them to the rear.

Costello stumbled. There was a lot of wire underfoot that had been uprooted by the bombardment. There was more of it standing. The men floundered through the strands, climbed over some of it, tore their clothes and mangled their hands. A sudden clamor of voices, and the rattle of breechlocks.

"Here they are, fellows!"

"Steady now, steady."

"Hold 'em, hold 'em!"

A confused medley of voices, shouts, curses. With the whirl of a flushing partridge a machine gun began firing into their very faces. Men began to drop everywhere. Somebody gave Hall a tremendous blow in the back.

"Who done that?" he cried angrily, turning around.

The force of that knock upset his balance, and he sank on his right arm. He dropped his rifle.

"Lie down, guy," said some one; "the stretcher-bearers will pick you up."

"Lie down!" said Hall, but he could not get upon his feet again.

His shoulder hurt him cruelly. And then he felt a warm, sticky wetness trickling about him. There seemed to be a lot of it. His exploring hand came back covered with blood.

"Thank God," said he, "I been hit."

The wound was between his shoulder-blades, so that he was unable to inspect it and judge of its severity. He unslung his pack, and regarded it earnestly. There was a tiny hole through the pocket in which he carried his mess-kit, and the bacon-can

and box of hardtack in the haversack,
between his mess-kit and his shoulder,
were punched with a jagged keyhole tear.

Again he reached a questing hand over
his shoulder. He felt tenderly of his back.
His hand was not so wet as before, the blood
was flowing less freely.

"Hot dog!" said Hall. "This will never
do. They'll think I'm camouflagin'."

Two men came slowly picking their
way through the wire. One of them bore
a strange piece of apparatus on his
shoulder.

"Hey!" yelled the wounded man. "First
aid!"

The two turned in his direction.

"Where yuh hit, buddy?" said one, dropping
to his knees and unrolling a bandage.

"In the back," said Hall.

Silently the other ripped up the bloody
blouse and shirt and swabbed the wound
with iodine. Then he rolled up his bandage
again and wrote out a tag.

"Your mess-kit saved some guys the
trouble of buryin' you," said the medical-
corps man. "How come you got hit in
the back?"

"How should I know? I didn't see it
comin'."

"You a non-com?"

"No."

"Crap-shooter?"

"Well, some; but I ain't made any money
at it for some time."

"Strange things happen in this man's Army. Maybe you stopped one that was meant for the looey or the top kick."

The two stretcher-bearers prepared to move on.

"Hey," said Hall, "don't I get a ride on that stretcher?"

"Ride ! That stretcher's for wounded men! You can walk all right."

"How far is it?"

"Couple o' miles. There's a dressin'-station at Rambucourt, and maybe they'll let yuh ride on a truck from there."

"Couple o' miles! Nix. I been hikin' since eight o'clock last night. I ain't goin' to walk another step."

"Suit yourself; it ain't no thin' in our young life," and the two moved off into the fog.

"Can yuh compree that!" muttered Hall bitterly.

He lifted himself to his feet and started off, reeling a little, back through the wire to the dressing-station.

BEHOLD now our friend Hall, seated on a wooden bench, clad comfortably, if not neatly, in a pair of coarse gray trousers, a loose coat of the same material, and a pajama shirt. With i him are two more with similar clothing. All about them is a pleasant green park, white-graveled walks, a fountain that plays merrily, enticing vistas leading away to shady depths, and opposite the bench is a long spacious colonnade, the entrance to a casino wherein is a wonderful spring that cures every ailment known to man or beast. Such a place was Vittel, where aforetime French society went to forget its cares,

and where at the time of this tale the wrecks of the actions at Cantigny, Chateau-Thierry, the Vesle and the lawn-party at St. Mihiel were being nursed back to usefulness again.

"This," said Hall, stretching himself luxuriously, "must be old man Riley's home town."

He lighted a cigaret. These were issued regularly, and as each soldier received far more than he could smoke and since the French yearned for American • tobacco, cigarets were a medium of exchange with both the military and the civilian population of the hospital center.

"They're never goin' to get me away from here without chains," said one of the other men on the bench, who wore on the lapel of his hospital clothing the globe and anchor that is the symbol of Uncle Sammy's Marine Corps.

"That's right," said Hall, "there's about three or four million men in the American Army, and they all ought to get a chance to go up to the front. I was crazy to get up till I got there, and then about ten seconds would do me for the rest of my life."

"It wouldn't be so bad," said the marine, "if you went up to the jump-off and had a day or so to ketch up with your sleep."

But this marchin' all night long and then goin' into a scrap without any breakfast. A guy knows that just as long as he's on his feet he ain't goin' to get any sleep, nor no chow."

"I sure was in luck," said Hall. "I got bumped about five minutes after we hopped off."

"Huh!" said the leatherneck. "I was in three days an' didn't have nothin' to eat but some bread I swiped out of a dead Jerry's knapsack. Then I was forty-eight

hours before they got me after I was hit.
Stretcher-bearers couldn't get in. Man, it
was hot in there. Why, the night before
I got hit "

He rambled on, the way the marines
always did, and his tale had much of admi-
ration in it for the soldiers of the sea.

Hall smoked peacefully. He belonged to
the first American division to land in France,
the first to take a hostile gun, the first to
do anything more than learn to throw
hand-grenades and kill bundles of branches.
His regiment was the only one in the whole
American Army that had not been broken
up to form new outfits. It was Old Army
to the core. Marines ruffled him not.

"What outfit you out of?" he asked the
third man on the bench.

"I'm a truck-driver," said this one with a
slight smile.

He was old and small of build, and looked
a lot like the little man in the cartoons that
represents the common people.

"Huccum you got hit?"

"I didn't get hit; I driv a truck clean
from Epinal to Chateauroux without gettin'
off the seat. Then I got off to stretch my
legs and some sanguinary illegitimate on a
motorcycle come along an' run over me."

"Waddya do before yuh come in the
Army?"

This from the marine; he saw a chance to
astonish this non-combatant.

"I reckon I was cuttin' my teeth," said
the little man with a slight smile. "Son,
I been in this man's Army since about the
time Cap'n Jack had his fight at the lava
beds. That was 'fore your pappy an'
mammy was born. I started in beatin' a

drum."

"Tell him somethin' about" the marines," suggested Hall.

The marine favored him with a look and announced he was going for a walk.

"Those birds got an idea they're the whole A. E. F.," said Hall to the old-timer.

"Naw," said the truck-driver; " 'tain't so. The old-timers in the leathernecks is all right. I soldiered with 'em in the Islands an' in China, an' 'most everywhere else. Rookies is always shootin' off their mouths thataway, specially if they ain't been in garrison for some time. Let 'em keep a squad-room clean for three or four months and wait till the other men have et before they gets their chance, and they soon tames down. You ever soldiered before?"

"No," said Hall; "I used to drive a grocery wagon in Philly. I had a row with the boss one Saturday night about workin' so late, so I went an' enlisted."

"You hit bad?"

"No, I ain't. I got a crack in the back o' the neck, but it went through my mess-kit and bacon-can and just knocked the flesh off. I only been here a week. This is my first day out o' bed."

"Well, you'll be goin' back pretty soon, won't you?"

"I will like ! I'm tellin' you I ain't never goin' back. I got outta that place alive, an' I don't never crowd my luck. No, sir! Every time I think o' those shells burstin' and them machine guns rippin' I get complete total paralysis of the heart, you bet. When that doctor examines me, I'm goin' to have so many different things the matter with me that it'll take him all day to write 'em down."

The old man grinned again.

"I'd like fine for to get up myself, I aim to see how they do their killin' now'days."

The two sat in silence after that, then Hall rose and departed for his particular hospital. His stomach told him that it approached time for mess. He went on down one of the paths, watched some men bowling on an open-air alley for a while, surprized a French chasseur alpin kissing a girl and then cut across the ball field to the Hotel Continental, where he lodged. One of the hospital orderlies hailed him in the hall.

"Classification exam tomorrow, soldier," said he. "Your name is on the list."

"What's all this?" asked Ira.

"All the men in this ward that are out of bed have to be examined to see what class they belong in. Class A goes back to their outfit. Class B gets a job guarding prisoners. I don't know what happens to Class C, but Class D goes home."

"I'll be Class D," said Hall emphatically.

The following day the doctor took his place at a table in the hall. Those whose fate hung upon his decision lined up along the wall and went before him one by one. Those waiting could hear all that was said, and could get some ideas for their own tales of woe from listening to those of others. The doctor had a sergeant of the medical corps for his assistant, a package of cigarets for the relieving of his nerves, and a rubber hammer with which he beat one on the knees, and occasionally on the head, in a playful manner, calling attention to the hollow sound. A huge, lumbering man with a cane approached the table.

"Well," said the medico, "what's the

matter with you?"

"My leg hurts, sir, every time I step on it."

"How long have you been here?"

"Three months, sir."

"Anything else the matter with you?"

"Oh, yes, sir; my ears hurt me all the time."

"Sort of burn, do they, and pains run through them?"

"Yes, sir; yes, sir; that's just the way they feel."

The doctor turned to his assistant with a bored air.

"Duty," said he. "Next man."

"Doctor," said the next, "I'm in bad shape."

He told why for some ten minutes.
The doctor inhaled his cigaret.

"Mark him 'Duty,' " ordered he.

"What's your complaint?"

"I've got trouble with my feet."

"Most of you birds have, especially when it comes time to go up on the lines again. What's the matter with them?" *

"They itch all the time."

"Well, I've heard of itching palm, but never of itching feet. Let's have a look at them."

The feet were inspected; the inspectee stood on his toes, jumped up and down on one foot and then the other, and worked himself into quite a froth. He looked hopefully at the doctor.

"Duty," said the doc.

"But look, doctor, I can't walk. I "

"Duty, I said; and duty you get! You're no sicker than I am! Haven't I listened to you gold-bricks tell your tale of woe for eight months? Up to the front with you, and make way for some wounded man."

About half a dozen more were disposed of, and then came Ira's turn. In this man's heart was a dull heaviness. He had heard better liars than he would ever be, recount injuries and ailments that would make a patent-medicine advertisement blush. What hope had he? With the brightness of the sun through clouds an idea came.

"Well?" said the judge of life and death.
"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothin'," said Hall.

The doctor and his assistant gasped.

"Nothing? Let's see his card."

They consulted the card together, the card that is put on a man in the field hospital and stays with him until he dies or leaves the base hospital for the replacement camp. On it is the whole history of his case. There was nothing there save the routine history of a gunshot wound.

"It says here you were shot."

"Oh, that's all right," said Ira; "that wasn't anything. Just a scratch."

He smiled benignly upon the medico.

"Well, what do you want to do now?"

"I want to go back to the front."

"By !" yelled the doctor. "This man is insane! Take him over to Twenty-three for observation . The States for him. "

And the wild hugs that Hall gave himself and his merry chuckles on the way to the Psychopathic Hospital only confirmed the impression that he was raving mad.

A WIDE plain, flat as a table-top, stretching into the darkness on either side. Acres and acres of twinkling lights and the coughing of innumerable steam engines. Whistles and the clanging of bells. A little group of soldiers clustering together for protection and mutual reassurance in front of a large hut. This was the regulating station and intermediate storage depot at Is-sur-Tille, and the soldiers were some who had arrived that evening from various hospitals, and were waiting for a guide to lead them out through the maze of railroad tracks to their quarters.

Among them, his bones filled with weariness and his heart with disgust, but with his stomach full of nothing, was one Ira Hall. He and three more had traveled all day from Vittel, riding gloriously in a third-class carriage, and they had had nothing to eat since breakfast.

"Come on, gang," called the guide, emerging suddenly from the hut.

He led the way down the road, and then struck off across the plain. The men followed, a mournful-looking company, the little gingham bag that was their only baggage hanging from each shoulder.

God bless the women that made those little bags! About six inches square they were, and in them were all the earthly possessions of their owners. When a man was first admitted to the hospital he was given one of these bags, known as Red Cross bags because of the tiny red cross

sewed on the side. In each was a little bag of candy, a pack of cards perhaps, sometimes a mirror. Gradually by fair means or otherwise would be added a toothbrush and a razor.

The main thing though was that the soldier had something he could call his own, somewhere to put what few treasures he had and this little piece of gingham was all that he could call his own from the time he reached the hospital until he went to the replacement camp to be fitted out to go back to the front again.

Suddenly a shaft of light shot across the dark path. A door from one of the nearby buildings had been opened. The men stopped aghast. The building was brightly lighted, and was full of women.

"How come! How come!" said they in amaze. They perceived that this barracks was surrounded by a high fence of barbed wire. A voice came to them from the darkness.

"Move your feet, guys; move your feet. Yuh ain't allowed to hang around here."

Speculation was rife as the soldiers moved on.

"What are them women doin' in the middle of a Yank storage depot?"

."They're women was caught fightin' dressed up like men, I bet."

"I betcha they're spies. I read a book about women spies. The German Army is full of 'em."

Finally the guide turned in a superior manner.

"Them are French refugees," he said.
"They work in the buildings and in the rest camp. That fence around there is to

keep you guys away. They got marines guardin' it, too."

"That wouldn't be a bad job," said Ira reflectively. •

The guard laughed.

"Wait till you see some of 'em. They'd scare the cooties off an Algerian."

Hall and his companions stumbled on. In the very heart of a gridiron of railroad tracks, in the midst of the crash and bang of shunting cars, were seven or eight huts, and into one of these they were led. Dirt floor, and a line of double-deck wooden bunks on each side. There on the first bunk was Costello, who will be remembered as the man who sat beside Hall while they waited for the signal to jump off. The two fell on each other's necks.

"Where yuh been?" asked Hall.

"The tube on my mask got shot away," said Costello, "and I got full o' gas. I got in this morning from Dijon."

"How did yuh like hospital?"

"Well, it was all right the first two or three days while I was still in bed, but after they got me up I had to do settin'-up exercises and run around the block and play O'Grady. By the time I did arms side-ward swing and palms open an' shut from eight in the morning till four in the afternoon with an hour off for dinner, I was wishin' I'd got a bullet through me* They let on it was to get the gas outta our lungs."

"Yeh, I know, I know. They had me in the nut ward for a while, but the main guy couldn't find nothin' wrong with me, so they give me the raz. They had me doin' ccok's police for a week or so."

"Any o' you birds just come in want

anything to eat, better go over to the mess-shack an' get it."

Thus a man who shoved his face in the barracks door.

"See yuh later," said Hall, and hurried forth.

The mess-shack was a building similar to the hut used as a barracks. It had two tables down the center, and two stoves at the far end, on which the cooking was done. A third table placed crosswise was used as a counter, and the pans containing food were placed on it. A female in a black dress was serving. There was goldfish — by which name salmon was known to the American soldiery — rice, sirup, coffee and bread.

The maiden in charge — whom we shall call the waitress — might have been fair had she possessed any front teeth. She was troubled also with a cold in her head, which necessitated frequent blowing of the nose, this being done in the good old-fashioned way — that is to say, with the fingers. The operation completed, the waitress would hurriedly begin to hand out the bread again, as if apologizing for having kept some soldier waiting.

No one made any comment. Either the men were too tired, or else nothing could dull the edge of their appetites. Very probably it was the latter.

Here are the different steps in the progress of a soldier from the time he leaves the hospital until he returns to his organization. The wounded man, coming to the base hospital in a suit of pajamas from the field hospital or evacuation hospital, was clothed in a uniform that covered his nakedness and that was all that could be said for it, inasmuch as it had been taken from some wounded man in the first place, sterilized and put back into service again. To this was due the scarecrow appearance

of casuals. By the way, a man was known as a casual during his travels, thus showing one and all that he belonged to no organization, had no friends and could be done dirt by with impunity.

From the base hospital the casuals went to a regulating-station — Is-sur-Tille, or Saint Dizier or some other place — and there were sorted out into the different branches of the service to which they belonged. From the regulating-stations they went to those great reservoirs, the replacement camps, each to his own. There they were given new clothes and fully equipped again and started back to their organizations.

If a man was clever enough, he could see to it that he never left the replacement camp, and some there were that took this method of keeping a whole skin. These last were not many, and the reason therefor shall presently appear.

In the morning Hall and Costello strolled out to view the sights. There were miles and miles of red wooden buildings in which were stored all the necessary tools for the carrying on of war. There were acres of railroad tracks, and real American-style freight-cars with American crews from the Railway Engineers running around their roofs, to the great horror of the French.

"Hey, look, Hall. Those are Jerries!"

True enough, several hundred of them breaking rocks for the new road, guarded by a few bored-looking Yanks. Most of the prisoners still wore their gray uniforms, but some wore the American blouse or breeches dyed a bright green, and all the laborers had P.W. in white letters painted on them somewhere.

"This is the nearest I ever was to so many of them," said Costello. "Looka that gray-headed guy, Ira. I'll bet he's old enough to be your grandfather."

"There's some young ones there, too.
That kid with the yellow band on his cap
ain't over fifteen, or I'm a liar "

The Germans worked on stolidly, pound-
ing the rocks with little hammers, and break-
ing them up into the proper sizes for road-
building. They paid no heed to the soldiers
that stopped and regarded them from time
to time. They did not talk among them-
selves, possibly from fear of divulging
some secret to the listeners. It must indeed
have been a cheerless prospect to live behind
a barbed-wire stockade and break rocks for
two or three years.

"I wonder if they wish they was back
with their regiments again?" said Costello.

"Do you wish you was back with yours?"

"I do like ! But I ain't breakin'

rocks all day, nor bein' penned up every
night."

"I dunno," said Ira, "but what I'd
rather been taken prisoner. Then you'd
be sure the war was over. Here it's just
one thing after another. I thought I was
all set to stay in Vittel, but they looked in
my ears and shined lights in my eyes and
allowed I was all right. Then they kicked
me the outta there."

Let us not judge Hall too harshly. Who
does not know the exhausted, irritable
feeling a man has after a night of broken
rest, when he has lain safely on his own
bed? Let him who would judge our soldier
go without sleep not one night, but two and
three or more. Let him take no food
during that time. Then let him see with
how much joy he welcomes the putting
of his life in peril.

Such a test is not really fair to the sol-
dier. He who simply goes without food

or sleep for a few days escapes the additional strain of the sight of his friends, not cleanly dead, but shattered and torn, like a fly killed with a newspaper. He will escape the sudden barrage, the steam-roller that rolls and rolls and beats everything to earth; he will escape the mad buzzing, the shrieking of the Strombos, the wild hammering of machine guns and the brain-rocking crash of bombs and all the terror and confusion of the air raid. He will not know the silent raiders of the night that creep into a trench and slit throats of sleeping men, leaving their bodies to be discovered in the chill of the dawn when the garrison turns out for "stand to" and their courage is at its lowest. One that has safely come forth from this is not to be blamed in that he yearns not to return.

ON THE morning of the third day Hall, Costello and three other men with a corporal named McGubbin, were handed an order to proceed to the infantry replacement camp at Saint Agnain, near Paris. It was inevitable that * this camp should be known to the army as Saint Agony. Their train would not go until evening, so that they had all day to make preparations. These consisted of borrowing some matches and drawing rations for the trip — some canned tomatoes, canned hash and canned beans. One could always tell a route that carried many troops by the amount of tin cans along the track. These men had no packs, so the chow was put in a wooden box, and the travelers set off for the station a good two hours before the scheduled departure of the train.

The six of them waited patiently under the dim lights of the gare. The train was always late, the police informed them. McGubbin and Costello kept charge of the box of chow.

"What kind of a train is it?" asked Hall.

"The American special they call it," said the M.P. "It just carries troops, and the crew are all Americans. It makes good time, they say. You guys are lucky you don't have to ride on a frog train."

"I'll say," replied Ira fervently. "I rode down on one from Vittel, an' believe me, I had a fine ride. We went almost four miles an hour on the straightaway stretches."

The crowd, grew larger.

"Are these guys all goin' away?"

"Sure. Some of 'em are from the rest camp, some of 'em are convoy men, goin' back to the base ports. Maybe there's some students goin' to Saumur or Gondrecourt. Lookit now, I'm teilin' you kinda friendly-like that when that train comes in you just get on, an' don't go lookin' for a good seat nor don't wait for any one else. It's goin' to be kinda crowded."

The M.P. nodded sagely to give emphasis to his remarks.

There was a long whistle, the dazzle of a headlight, and the train rolled in, a long line of sleepers, or wagons-lits. Hall essayed to board one.

"Nix," said the M.P. "Those are for officers; yours are back farther."

Ira hurried to the rear of the train, he and Costello carrying the box, while the corporal ran ahead to find an empty compartment. Sounds of strife arose. What looked like a young riot was in progress. It appeared that those on the train refused to open the doors, asserting that there was no room for any more therein. Those without denied this and tore at the handles and beat at those at the windows with their fists.

There was the sound of splintering wood.
Here and there a door was wrenched open,
and men shot out like seeds from a squeezed
orange. Others were torn bodily from
within the cars.

One poor man held on to the door-jamb
and howled lustily, the while another tried
to drag him forth by the slack of his cloth-
ing. The waist-belt of his breeches gave way,
and the situation became embarrassing.

The man hanging to the car raised his
voice and howled for assistance. His
friends held on to him with vigor. Those
on the platform, seeing his plight, hastened
to add their assistance to drag him forth.

A ripping sound, and he was free. The
remnants of his clothing were waved an
instant in the air and then lost sight of.
He must have had a fine time when he
arrived at where he was going.

"Trooper!" said a voice in his ear.

A door opened almost in front of Hall,
and without hesitation he climbed into the
compartment. He had lost both Costello
and the chow-box early in the fracas.

"Shut that door," cried a dozen

voices, and two men promptly tried to
close it.

Too late. Fifty pairs of hands had
seized it, and twenty-five men did their
best to squeeze through the narrow open-
ing. Blood was drawn here from noses,
and knuckles were skinned on teeth.

The police arrived in swarms, their clubs
swinging freely. Men were hurled into
compartments with the force of shells.
Others were pushed in by main strength.
Somehow, somewhere, that crowd was
wedged into the train, and the cars began
to move. The windows were thronged

with men exchanging compliments with the military police.

Hall wriggled a bit, and looked to see if there was any place to sit down. He tried to move a little to one side to get relief from the intolerable pressure, but he was unable to change his position by so much as an inch.

A French third-class carriage is divided into compartments, running across from side to side, with a door at either side. There are two seats that face each other, with room for four people on each seat. Over these seats is a baggage-rack.

There was a dim light from a small bulb in the ceiling, and all that Hall could see were overseas caps, tossing and wagging with the motion of the train.

"Well," thought he, "that means all night and all the next day standin' up in , the car. An' people at home kick if they ride in a street-car and stand up for a couple of blocks!"

The train stopped again after a time, and M.P.'s appeared and announced that more passengers must be got aboard. There were not as many as at Is-sur-Tille, and the delay was not so great. The train started again with a few more clubbed heads and several new passengers.

At the next stop there was no getting another man on that train. Club as they might, and even draw their guns, the police could not wedge another man into those compartments.

A very haughty sergeant tried to make a personal inspection of a car. He was helped in by welcoming hands— how they made room for him was a mystery — and shortly bleats of protest rent the air.

The sergeant was hurled forth, minus

gun, club and most of his clothing. His flying body struck some would-be rescuers and bore them to earth. As the train moved on a man who wore about his brow the poor sergeant's brassard leaned from a window.

"Who won the war?" cried he, and blew a kiss to the enraged M.P.'s.

At one station two men appeared bearing between them one far gone in liquor. They had a worried look about them, as of men who had been saddled with some hopeless task. Opposite Hall's compartment they let their burden fall to the ground and declared loudly that there was no room on the train. An officer appeared, bearing a lantern.

"Get me a bucket of water!" cried he.

It was brought.

"Now pick up that man by the heels."
Here he whispered into the ears of his helpers.
"Now! One!"

— the men started to swing the helpless drunkard.
"Two!"

The swings grew wider.
"Three!"

The man with the bucket sloughed the water in on the men in the compartment, who promptly ducked, leaving the window free, and at once the bibulous one was hurled in upon their heads. Howls of rage arose. The men in the compartment were packed so close that they could not give way and let the new passenger fall to the floor, and he was no burden to be borne on the heads and shoulders all night.

"Put him in the baggage rack!"

"Yeh, put him in the rack! Up with him now!"

The drunken soldier was seized and lifted into the rack by willing hands. Hall jammed his legs in with vigor. One of those hobnailed shoes had made unpleasant contact with Ira's nose.

After that Hall had a little time to meditate on his position. He was due to spend all night and the next day on his feet. He had no food, and there was none in sight. He had no orders since McGubbin, being a corporal, had retained their only copy.

Now this was serious. A man who had no authority for his travel would be seized by the first A.P.M. that discovered it, and put to work lugging rails or unloading cars or at some other congenial form of labor.

The man in the baggage rack showed signs of becoming violently ill. He was hurriedly seized and dragged from his refuge, then passed from hand to hand or rather head to head until he reached the window. Hall, who was near the door, had a bright thought, which he proceeded to put into execution. He was very solicitous of the comfort of the unfortunate one, holding his head, undoing his blouse and so forth.

"Dump that bird out the window," said some one.

The train was slowing down for another station, and the suggestion was carried out.

"A drunk never gets hurt," said one of the men.

In the light of an arc light shining into the compartment Hall eagerly read the folded paper he had removed from the inebriated one's left-hand upper pocket.

Sure enough, it was a travel order, properly stamped, ordering the bearer, one Pvt. Duffin, 55th Regiment of Artillery,' to report to the commanding officer, F.A.R.R., Le Corneau, Gironde.

Stiff, red-eyed and dirty-faced, the men crawled out of the train at Tours. They stood in line at the assistant provost marshal's desk and had their orders stamped, and then were told to go outside and fall* in, and they would be taken to chow.

"How far is it?" asked Ira.

"Up to the Caserne Lafayette, about four miles," said a sergeant of police.

"Four miles! I can't walk four miles. I been standin' up in that train all today an' the night before."

"You don't need to go if you don't want to," said the sergeant kindly. "You can wait here in the station."

"Where do I go from here?"

"Let's see your orders."

He perused the slip rapidly.

"Huh! F.A.R.R. That's near Bordeaux. Two o'clock you get a train for Bordeaux. Leaves from Saint Pierre des Corps."

"Two o'clock! What the ! Have

I got to lose another night's sleep? That's a of a system!"

"Lookit, trooper, a guy named John J. Pershing is runnin' the A.E.F.; I ain't. You can get outta here at two g.m. or stay all night in the mill; I don't care. I'm only tellin' you."

Hall went out and took his place in the

waiting fine. Shortly they were marched to the other end of the city and fed.

After supper Hall went to the main gate of the caserne and inquired of the sergeant of the guard what he should do.

"Git a gate pass in that office there, an' go out an' look the town over. You might as well be outside as stickin' around here."

"What's F.A.R.R. mean?" asked Ira.

"Search me," said the sergeant. "Foul Air an' Rotten Rations for a guess."

He spoke truer than he knew.

The gate pass was secured, and Ira went forth into the dusk. He set off in the general direction of the depot, and after diving down one dark street and up another and making many side excursions down mysterious alleys he arrived in what seemed to be the center of things.

Lights streamed from cafe doors, and one could catch glimpses of white tables, sparkling glassware, brightly clothed women and glittering officers of all armies. Russians there were, French, British, Polish, Belgian and, of course, American. The sidewalks were thronged with them.

Hall became acutely conscious of the fact that his blouse was old and several sizes too small, that his breeches had been made for some one larger than he, and that the patches on the knees thereof were of a different color from the rest of the garment. He knew that his puttees were mere strips of rag, and that his hair needed cutting. Here was no place for any buck private.

He crossed the street and went by in the shadow of the trees. He felt no bitterness that others should carouse and soak themselves in wine while he and his fellow

suffered the tortures of hell. Perhaps those officers were on leave from the front and were enjoying life while they might. If Hall had had some decent clothes and a month's pay in his pocket, he would have been in the very center of the very brightest of all those bright places, a girl on each knee and one around his neck. Alas, he was bound to the only mast that would keep him from the sirens of France. He had not been paid for four months.

ON THE shores of the Bay of Biscay, south of Bordeaux, is a desolate tract of sandy country with dense forests of pine toward the coast. This section is known as the Landes, and has been the subject of many a gloomy tale. No one lives there but a few shepherds and gatherers of pitch. A tiny railroad runs from La Teste de Boucque to Caseaux, and this is the only means of transportation.

One of the stations is called Le Corneau, and here the French established a training-camp for the Senegalese or negro battalions, where there would be no friction with white inhabitants, and where there would be no chance for desertion. When the Senegalese had all been trained and taken up to the front and killed off, the camp lay empty until it was turned over to the Americans, who established a replacement camp for the field and railroad artillery there.

This camp was in a state of filth and dilapidation that defies description. The Americans whitewashed the portable huts that served as barracks, sprinkled a little chlorid of lime around and declared themselves ready. It was a terrible place; but when two millions of men must be tucked away somewhere in a tiny country, one-half of which is in the hands of the enemy and the other crowded with the armies of the entire world, it stands to reason that the last comers are going to have to take what is left. People who go late to a show

should not object to poor seats.

To this cheery place came Hall, a day's journey from Bordeaux. He climbed wearily from the little rattling train that had brought him from La Teste, and surveyed the camp.

"So this is the F. A. R. R. I'll get mine when they find out I'm a doughboy."

He turned in his orders at the headquarters, not forgetting that his name was no longer Hall but Duffin, and was turned over to the supply company for rations, that being the organization that received all casualties. Two blankets he drew, a shelter half, a pack, a mess-kit, a bacon and condiment can — who ever carried bacon or condiments in them? — a pistol-belt, a pole and some tent-pegs. These last he conveniently dropped between the supply room and the barracks.

Four thirty p.m. Chow in an hour. The men in the barracks were playing cards, smoking, reading and lying, just as any other crowd of idle males would.

"What outfit you out of?" asked the man on the opposite bunk.

"Sixteenth Infantry," said Hall.

"Infantry! Waddya doin' in this camp?"

Hall explained.

"I can get by, I guess, unless they set me to workin' round one o' those seventy-fives."

"Well," said the other man, "I'll tell yuh. I been here a week. Name's Knox. I'm outta the Seventh Field. They're heavies, you know, but anything that's artillery comes to this camp just the same. There's two old seventy-fives here to train two thousand men with, so you won't get

blisters takin' a breech-block apart.

"An' then another thing. You said that Duffin guy was from the Fifty-fifth. That's a railroad outfit. You can claim you don't savvy nothin' but fourteen-inch. But what'll you do when they send you up to the front again? They'll know when yuh get to the Fifty-fifth that you ain't Duffin."

"Listen, Knox, I ain't never goin' up to no front again. I know when I'm well off. I been draggin' myself all over France these last two or three days with nothin' to eat, and standin' up in trains all night, and fightin' with the police, an' I crave a little rest. An' right here is where I get said rest. Right here. When I'm rested enough to go back to the front again, the war's goin' to be over."

"You an' me both," said Knox fervently. "But somehow this place don't fit in with the dreams I've had o' the place I was goin' to rest in. Gee, it's time for first call. I better go wash."

He snaked a tin basin from under the bunk and departed.

"How do they eat here?" asked Hall of the man in the bunk above him.

"Well," said the other, "it isn't so bad, when you can get any of it. You know there are about six hundred men in the supply company, and more come in every day. They have a great system. The gang from each barracks lines up in front of its building, and then they march over in turn to the mess-shack. Anyway that's the theory."

"Waddya mean, theory?"

"You wait, buddy, and you'll see for yourself."

. Knox rushed in just as retreat blew and tossed his towel on a nail, and the two hustled out. Hall gasped. Men were pouring from barracks like water from an overturned jug. He hadn't thought that there were so many in the whole camp.

"Where do all these birds keep themselves, Knox?"

"Huh! Each one has got a place of his own. They lie doggo during the day, but every one comes to retreat because then they read off the names of the men that are to go away."

A man with the chevrons of a first sergeant began to blow on his whistle and continued to do so until he was quite black in the face. Then by way of change he shrieked, "Attention!" several times at the top of his lungs, and then fell to on the whistle again.

The six hundred conversed affably with each other. They were lined up three ranks deep, and their front covered more than a hundred yards. At the far end of the line some twenty-five or thirty reclined at ease on the ground. The company began to shuffle its feet, and at once a thick, heavy cloud of dust rose from the sand, blackened with ashes of four years' fires. The top kick still called like a lost soul in that black cloud.

At once it came upon the six hundred that he was reading a list of names. Silence fell with a suddenness that hurt.

The first sergeant read rapidly, paying no attention to the shouted "Heres," nor to the silence that followed the calling of some of the names. Conversation gradually started again, and men began coolly to leave the ranks and go into the huts.

"That ain't no list," they said. "He's callin' the roll."

"How do they know?" asked Hall.

"If he reads off the names fast like that, and non-coms and bucks all together, he's just calling the roll; but if he reads 'em slowly with a bunch of sergeants and corporals first, it's an order, and those men are going away. You can easily tell the difference after you've heard a few."

"Ain't the band goin' to play The Star-Spangled Banner'?"

"I don't know; I never heard it. Retreat doesn't mean anything here. How are you going to get any order with a bunch of Indians like that?"

"My " said Hall. "What kind of a

madhouse have I got into? Yuh'd think they was a bunch of Bolsheviks!"

Mess was immediately after retreat, and the men equipped themselves with their mess-kits and fell in again. This time there were not so many. In fact, there were surprizingly few in front of one hut, which, by the way, was the one scheduled to march to the mess-shack last.

Some of the jaw-bone n.-c.o.'s took their places between the huts, and gave the commands for marching. There was some jeering at this, and subdued laughter, as of men having a private joke up their sleeve. The jaw-bones, lacking experience, got one of the squads turned upon itself, so that no one knew where he was supposed to go and had no knowledge of what his neighbor did, save that he was walking up the back of his neck; and what with the rage at being ordered about by a John, and the knowledge that the other squads were getting ahead of them in the chow line, and a general disgust at all the world in general and Le Corneau in particular, these poor convalescents were well-

nigh beside themselves with rage.

"To with right face an' left face;
I'm goin', " said one, and he went.

The squad started to the chow line by the
most direct line.

"Hey! Git outta there; we come ahead
of you guys!"

"Get back into ranks!"

"Squad halt!"

This last brought a ringing cheer. The
next squad quickened their step and then
broke into a slow trot. A roar went up
from five hundred throats; and all and
severally, the men of the supply company
broke their formation and made for the
cook-shack at a dead run.

Here their shouts took on a different
tone. Some hundred men were standing
in line there, and these prepared to defend
their position to the death. The battle
became general.

Hall stood aloof for a moment and then
made his decision. It mattered not to him
who stood first in line, nor how many men
would be ahead of him. At a table in front
of the shack stood two grinning cooks'
police, ready to serve out the bacon and
bread. They were enjoying the spectacle
of the fight much as keepers would a row
among their charges in a zoo.

Hall scooped up a mess-kit full of bacon,
seized a handful of bread and then fled.
But he had been seen. The six hundred
straightway stopped their struggle for
places in the line and bore down upon the
food. Two men seized the boiler full of
bread and started off; a third leaped into it
with both feet, tearing it from their hands;
and then the three were buried under an
avalanche of grabbing hands and stamping

feet. The table crashed to earth in ruin.

A lieutenant and the first sergeant rushed from the orderly room, blowing their whistles. The top went straightway to the cans of hot water, bubbling over a fire-pit dug in the ground in preparation for the washing of many mess-kits, and cast buckets of this boiling water all about upon the struggling men. Many of them retired to the mess shack and continued the battle there, to the accompaniment of crashing pans and the bulging of the buildings' walls.

The officer smote the first man he came to upon the jaw, wafting him against the coffee urn, which promptly overset and well-nigh drowned the bold top. This last fled shrieking, with his shirt and breeches full of hot coffee.

The turmoil of battle carried to the guard-house.

"Turn out, gang," called the O.D.;
"there's another mess-shack fight at the supply company."

The guard trotted across the parade, but when they reached the scene there was no one in sight. And the fragments of that supper would not feed a healthy Airedale.

Some time later the lieutenant went down the line of huts and thus delivered himself —

"Those men who did not take part in the riot and who got no supper may fall in and be marched to the second company's mess-shack."

He repeated this at each hut. Verily he was a trusting young man, and one not mindful of the evil of the world. When he reached the last barrack he turned around. There were some six hundred men lined up behind him.

COLD dawn with a freezing mist,
the high, thin Wail of first call, then
Efla TM in a little time the faint strains of .
the band over by the guard-house playing
"There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town
Tonight." Now this is a Marine song, so
the chances were that the leader was some
old leatherneck.

Whistles began to shriek. In an outfit
where there are many new non-commis-
sioned officers there is always a great
clamor of whistles just before assembly.
Hall was not used to them; they made
him nervous. In his company they were
rarely used, and then only by the officers.
The first sergeant had no use for one, being
blessed with a voice that would shake a
bird from the limb of a tree.

"Huccum all this tootin'?" said Ira, as
he struggled into his blouse.

"Don't mean nothin'," said the man in
the next bunk. "No formation — only for
the replacements; leastways they're the
only ones that go."

"Waddye get up for?"

"No breakfast if yuh stay in bed. Better
beat it an' get in line, or you'll lose another
meal."

This time there was no pretense of form-
ing to be marched over. Every one went
at his best speed and got as near the head
of the line as he could. The head was a
doubly desirable place, since those who were
fed first could dash around to the end of the
line and be in time for a second mess-kit
full before the chow was all gone. This
was possible for only a few.

It was bitter cold. Ira secured two slices
of bacon, some fried potatoes, a little Karo,
a slice of bread and tin cup full of coffee,
and then retired to the side of the fire that
was burning under the water-cans in prep-

aration for the washing of the mess-kits.
It was beautifully warm there, and he put his
breakfast on the sand and crouched over
it in happy anticipation. A huge foot
went by and scattered a film of black dust
over the contents of the meat-can.

"You poor tripe!" said Hall. "Keep
those big mud-scows of yours out of my
mess-kit!"

"Fry your ear," said the culprit. "Go
an' eat somewhere else if you don't like it."

Ira arose and looked lie other between
the eyes, but he kept his mess-kit in his
hand while he did it. The man with the
big feet went on without further parley, and
Hall returned to his breakfast. The hot
coffee and the warm food felt good in the
poor man's inside, and did fair to raise his
body temperature to normal. The sun
was not yet up, and the mist clung thickly.

Suddenly from the fog came a sharp
voice —

"Get your feet out of my
mess-kit!"

"Get your mess-kit out from
binder my feet then."

"I'll show you, you !"

The sound of running feet. Then the
first voice again boastingly:

"He'd better run. I'd broke every
bone in his body. Kickin' sand all over
my bacon!"

A pause: then the same voice complain-
ingly with just a hint of apprehension —

"Where'd my bacon go?"

The sound of snickering, like the rat-
tling of paper. A gruff, heavy, taunting

voice —

"Never mind the bacon; eat your breakfast."

"I kinda thought that was the game," said Hall to himself. "Pick a fight with a guy, and then some one else swipes his chow. Huh!"

When first call for drill blew, Ira looked about him for Knox, but he was nowhere to be seen, nor were any of the other men in evidence. The infantryman was in doubt whether to attend drill or not, but there was no one to advise him, and the habit of discipline was strong upon him. He guessed he'd better go. He wondered how the six hundred would behave at drill.

Poor Hall! When he took his place in ranks he gazed about him with wondering eyes. There were not enough men there to make more than three healthy squads. They were armed with rifles, which cheered him somewhat as he had feared that there would be maneuvers with a field-gun, a piece of apparatus that he knew nothing about.

"Where's all the gang?" he asked the man next to him.

"They don't ever stand drill," was the reply. "Only us poor guys that belong to the replacement draft have to. They give us the manual of arms and squads right and left, and then the loot asks us questions about the parts of the field-gun, and who takes off the breech cover at the command, 'Prepare for action.' A hell of a lot of good that will do us when we get up to the front."

"I'll say," said Hall.

The men were fallen in and marched toward the drill-ground; but when they had gone but a few paces a complication

arose. A major with a bull-like voice halted them.

"What organization is this?" he asked the lieutenant.

"Supply company, sir."

"Supply company? Supply squad! You had six hundred and thirty-five men on the morning report. Don't deny it. I saw it myself. There aren't more than thirty here. Where are the others? Speak up now. Where are they?"

"They must be on detail somewhere, sir. I leave that to the first sergeant. These are all the men available for drill."

The poor lieutenant began to perspire slightly.

"Detail !" roared the major.

"They're all in these barracks; I know they are. Go into that one and dig them out — at once now; turn 'em out for drill. What's the Army coming to!"

The lieutenant walked toward the nearest hut. Perhaps in order to make clear what follows, it would be well to give a description of the buildings of which Le Corneau was composed. These huts were invented by the same man that invented the tin hat, and were put up in sections. There was a door at both ends. At about the height of a man's chest from the floor the wall flared outward, making a storage space some three feet deep. The hut had the appearance of a common wall tent, save that it was made of wood, and the space where the guy ropes would be was covered over, making the flare described above. It was the custom to hang slickers, overcoats, packs and all the odds and ends of equipment from the wall, just above the flare, so that they hung down and curtailed off the space in back of them. Let

us now proceed.

When the officer was several paces from the door, there came a sound of scrambling. Then men poured from the farther door in a stream. The major's wattles grew crimson, and he bellowed melodiously.

The watching men shook with delight. The longer this kept on, the less time would be left for drill.

The lieutenant entered the door, all unaware that the bird had flown. The hut was empty. He returned to the major, happy in that his story had been vindicated.

"Sir," said he, "there was no one in the barrack."

Who is he that hath said profanity springs from a lack of vocabulary? Not so. The squad listened while the major went from the burning, blazing heat of the sun's innermost depths to the stark cold of interstellar space, from the high heights of heaven to the blackest, foulest pit of irretrievable perdition. He spoke feelingly of the lieutenant's ancestors, his immediate family and descendants. He gave his views of the Army, the war, G. H. Q. and the commissioned personnel of the field artillery replacement reserve. Pinwheels flashed, rockets soared and burst and diamonds glittered in his speech.

The listening soldiers treasured every word. Happy, laughing faces were at the windows of all the huts.

"Now," said the major, "come with me, and I will show you how to turn out these everlastingly condemned gold-bricks."

He selected two of the huskiest of the jaw-bone non-coms and had them take position at the farther doors of the barracks. Then the two officers moved toward the door of the nearest building. The faces

disappeared from the windows. The non-coms at the farther door were seen to take the position of charge bayonet, and confused sounds were heard.

The officers entered. Silence. They re-appeared at the other door. The major's words could be heard distinctly, even at a distance of a mile or so..

"In the name of all that is blue and green and red, what did you let those men out for?"

The two jaw-bones executed rifle salute as prescribed.

"Sir, no one came out."

The major went back into the building. The signs of recent occupancy were numerous. There were the hands of a game of black-jack lying face down on one of the bunks, smoldering cigarets on the floor, a pipe with a thread of smoke rising from the bowl. A complete outfit of clothing for one man lay across a bunk.

"Some one," said the major, "will be badly sunburned before he gets back."

The two officers repeated their inspection at the next hut with the same result. They went to every barracks in the line, and then came sadly back to the waiting squad.

"Well, well, lieutenant!" said the senior officer. "Don't bother me with your troubles. I have too much to do to be chasing soldiers all the morning. I can't help it if you can't get your men out to drill. There now, take what few you have and run along with them. They are all you can handle, I dare say."

And he departed on his way. The lieutenant sadly marched the squad to the drill-ground for the forty minutes that remained of the drill period. The men

felt sorry for him.

"Saturday, thank ," said Knox after mess, "and no drill to duck this afternoon."

"Where was all that gang when the major went in the barracks this morning?" asked Hall.

"In the dugouts."

"Dugouts?"

"Sure, back o' the slickers and stuff on the wall. The looey'll get wise to it some day though, and then we'll have to hunt a new place."

"It appears to me," said Ira, "that this camp is a bum place to rest."

"It's better than duckin' shells anyway," replied Knox.

"Turn out to draw Bull Durham," called a voice outside the next barracks.

Hall made a wild dash for the door, and then stopped. Clearly something was wrong here. Some of the men reconnoitered the adjoining hut through the windows. Others went into seclusion behind the slickers without delay. No one seemed anxious to receive any tobacco.

"What's comin' off here?" muttered Hall.

"Don't never turn out for any call like that," said a soldier, "unless you see somebody right there with a cartoon of Bull."

Hall looked out the window. Sure enough there was one of the jaw-bones with a big pasteboard box under his arm.

"Come on out, guys," was the universal cry. "It's a sure-enough tobacco issue."

The barracks was rapidly emptied. Knox and one or two more remained.

"You stay in here," said Knox, seizing Hall by the coat. "I smell somethin'

wrong. Now don't be a fool. Stick

around. They don't give nothin' away in this place without a string to it, especially on Saturday afternoon."

"Aw, what's eatin' yuh?" cried Ira. "Ain't the guy out there issuin' it out?"

"Come here," said a man at the window. "Can you imagine this!"

There was a line of eager soldiers in front of the next hut, a man with a big box full of Bull Durham and a lieutenant who gave a sharp command as Hall reached the window. The waiting line snapped to attention.

"Left face!" said the looey. "Forward, hart!"

The men marched off out of sight. The man with the tobacco turned and went the other way, with never so much as a glance at the disappearing men.

"I thought it was some gag like that," said one of the watchers at the window. "They'll go down to the tracks and unload cars all the afternoon, and all the Bull they'll get will be what that officer throws while they're workin'."

A WEEK passed. How simple a thing it is to write thus! In that ~ week Hall went through tortures that he never knew existed. Each day the selfsame fight for food. He stole from other mess-kits and had his own stolen. He fought for his place in the line, only to find when the fight was over that the chow

was all gone.

The hiding-place behind the slickers was discovered, and Hall found a new one in the pine woods across the railroad tracks. He was dragged forth from this one by the police and spent a hot day on the rock-pile, regretting it.

He had forgotten to answer to the name of Duffin at roll-call, and hence found that he was being carried as absent without leave. This meant that he would never be sent away because his name would never be put on an order. The only thing to do would be to announce that he had returned and stand trial for being away the better part of a week. Indeed he was upon the horns of a dilemma, and had both of them skewered clear through him.

"I had a new dodge today," said Knox one evening as they were discussing their wos. "I had a box I carried around with me all day. I didn't go out an' hide. I just stuck around the camp. Every time an officer or an M. P. came near, I'd pick up the box and walk off with it, like I was carryin' it somewhere. Then just about half an hour before recall some wise bird halts me an' asks where I'm goin' with the box.

" 'I'm goin' to the supply company with it,' says I.

" 'How come there's nothin' in it?' says he.

" 'Firewood,' says I.

" 'Well, you be sure you get it to the supply company right priesa,' says he. 'I see you carryin' it four times already, an' it's the same box 'cause I remember the tomato label on it.' "

"How's the chances on goin' over the hill?" said Ira casually.

"Nothin' doin'. D'yuh know what keep-in' yuh here? There's the regular camp guard — just guys like us, you know. Then there's the provosts sergeants' gang from the F. A. R. R. all mounted, an' one behind every bush "

"I'll say!" agreed Ira.

"Then on the road is the regular police, the Sixth Cavalry, mounted an' dis-mounted all the way between here an' Bordeaux, an' each town has its own special police. A frog gendarme ain't above pickin' you up either."

"I know a good chance to get out," said a man on an upper bunk. "They're goin' down to the Spanish border tomorrow to get horses, an' a detail is goin' along. They're goin' to take their lunch an' everything."

"How do you know?" demanded Hall.

"I heard the top kick talkin' about it."

"Let's go," said Hall.

"Nix," answered Knox. "It's a stall."

"I'm goin' to look into it anyway. I crave to get out of this hole, even for a day."

The next morning it appeared that the rumor was true. The cook's police were busy making up sandwiches, and the supply sergeant had a huge pile of halter shanks in front of his door. Excitement was high. Even the worst drill-dodgers in the company besought the top to be allowed to go — all save Knox, who remained aloof.

"I don't trust 'em," said he.

After breakfast two halter shanks were

issued to every one that applied. It would have been obvious to a disinterested party that if those men were really going somewhere in trucks it would require a considerable train to transport them. It would also be noticed that nothing had been announced officially regarding their destination. The first sergeant had started the rumor and had allowed it to take its course, knowing that it would run like a prairie fire. The men were fallen in and marched away.

A FRENCH freight-car has at one end a little house, set just below the level of the roof and reached by a flight of steps. This is for the use of the brakeman. The last car of a train leaving Le Corneau with troops for the front had such a house. Up its steps might be seen creeping a soldier. It was Hall. He slid into the house cautiously. It was occupied by a man who was trying to hide behind the door.

"Knox!"

"Hall! What the are you doin'

here? I thought you was goin' to Spain?"

"Aw, those scurvy bar sinisters!" said Hall. "They marched us down to the other end of the camp an' give us each two horses. Then they told us to take 'em across the railroad track and graze 'em all day. Can yuh imagine stayin' out there holdin' them two goats all day an' eatin' a cold lunch of bread an' goldfish in sight of your own kitchen? Not me! The whole outfit bit on that one. After all the stalls we had put up on us, we oughta known better."

"Then what?"

"I held 'em till they near pulled

my arm off, one goin' one way an' one the other, an' then I tied 'em to a tree. When

I was beatin' it across the track this train
was goin' out.

" 'Where yuh goin'?' I says.

" 'First Division,' says the guys in the
cars, so I got on."

He paused a moment, his eyes on the
receding camp.

"I'm goin' back to the front. I need a
rest."

"You an' me both," said Knox.

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